

Lawful Good by Pie_pecans_and_parrots

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Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Steve Harrington & Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Steve Harrington & Nancy Wheeler & Original Character, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Original Female Character(s)

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Summary:

“Dusty, the arcade is not exactly a matter of life and death...”

She heard a scandalised gasp, and suddenly he was back in the kitchen, somehow appearing through the other door way, making her jump slightly. “Lottie! It’s a matter of honour.” He said seriously, and Charlotte sighed.

Charlotte Henderson may look fine - better than fine, even - but she carries a gun in her purse, and is more afraid of the dark than any normal teenager should be.

1. Maximum Effort

“Son of a bitch! Son of a bitch!”

Charlotte Henderson looked up from her notebook, a frown bringing her eyebrows together over her green eyes. She brushed her newly platinum blonde hair out of her eyes, fixing her gaze on her brother’s frantic figure as he ran through the kitchen. “Hey! Language, Dustin!”

Dustin paused in the doorway, spinning in place to fix her with a helpless look, “You don’t understand! This is an emergency. I *need* money for The Palace.”

Charlotte groaned as he left the room, and could hear him rummaging noisily – and no doubt destructively – through the hallway cabinet. “Dusty, the arcade is not exactly a matter of life and death...”

She heard a scandalised gasp, and suddenly he was back in the kitchen, somehow appearing through the other door way, making her jump slightly. “Lottie! It’s a matter of *honour*.” He said seriously, and Charlotte sighed.

“Come on then, loser.” She jumped down from her spot on the kitchen bench, and beckoned him to follow her. He did, still pouting exaggeratedly. She walked over to the cat house in the living room, and squatted, reaching into one of the cubby holes and pulled out a jar of loose change. Dustin’s eyes widened, but under her sudden narrowing eyes, he hid his reaction. “This will be re-hidden by the time you get back. *Before* curfew.” She added hastily. Dustin rolled his eyes, which she returned, shaking a handful of change into his outstretched cap.

“Thanks, Lottie. You’re the best!” he trilled joyfully, and gave her a salute. “LOVE YOU!” he bellowed over his shoulder, running into his room and slamming the door behind him. Charlotte smiled to herself, screwing the lid back on the mason jar.

“Love you too, buddy.”

“Fuck.”

First day of school blues always hit Charlotte like a tonne of bricks. There was nothing more depressing than the prospect of another couple of months stuck in *hell*.

She ran a hand through her messy hair, attempting to comb it slightly, but the unruly locks never really liked to do what she wanted. At least she could say it was deliberately messy. Being a rocker and all...

Not that she really felt like one anymore.

With the Christmas Holidays taking Richard to his family in Iowa, and Edward travelling all the way down to New Mexico in order to see his grandparents, coupled with Charlotte not having a guitar, and the fact that her arm was *still* healing – Charlotte hadn't played any music in a long time. It was rankling at her.

The wounds were closed, scar tissue slowly, but surely forming – but the stiffness and aching in the muscles affected by the attack weren't as easy to get rid of. The doctor had told her that with proper exercise she would regain proper usage of her arm. But it was a slow process, and she missed her music every day.

On the plus side, she'd been writing a lot more – she'd composed a bunch of new songs, including finishing off the one she'd started with Will. There was nothing like physical and emotional trauma to really get the creative juices flowing.

She grimaced at her dark thought, pointedly thinking of her upcoming classes. It wouldn't do her any good to fall into *those* memories. She relived them enough at night.

It was too late.

She could feel her heart rate picking up – and before she could stop

herself, she crossed to her bed, and pulled out the gun she slept with, shoving into her waistband and leaving her room. Fear was a strange thing – it made her pathetic, made her impulses too strong – and she hated being out of control of herself. She was *strong*, dammit – and she hated that fear made her so *weak*.

But with the gun safely tucked into her high waisted jeans, she tucked in the front of her oversized band tee – Michael Jackson’s face grinning out proudly – and pulled down the sleeves of the blue long sleeved thermal she was wearing underneath to cover her hands. She shrugged on a multi-coloured wind breaker she’d stolen from Jonathan last time she’d been at his house, and lugged her bag over her shoulder, as – on cue – Jonathan’s car honked from outside.

She paused on her way out to check that her mother was sleeping – she was, Mews purring on her lap, but regarding her coolly with his yellow eyes. She saluted him, and then left, snagging her mug of coffee on the way out.

She swung into the front seat, expertly balancing her bag upright as she chugged down the now lukewarm drink. By the time she had finished, burping loudly, they were pulling out of her driveway – and she noticed Jonathan’s pointed disgusted look. “Ew.” He said simply, switching on his indicator with a decisive flick of his wrist.

“Don’t be mean to me!” she pouted, and their eyes met – his still disgusted, hers pouty. After a moment they both broke, laughing at themselves. “Good to see you, J.”

“Good to see you too, Charlie.” Jonathan grinned at her, before his eyes fell upon the windbreaker. His eyes narrowed. “Is that... mine?”

She beamed at him. “Yeah – your mom said I could keep it. She said you wore it when you were a freshman.” Jonathan’s face contorted with mixed embarrassment and playful annoyance, as Charlotte reached across to pinch his cheek. “Lil Jonny! In his rainbow jacket!” she said in a screechy high-pitched whine. He winced, and batted her hand away.

“You’re the worst.”

Charlotte sat back, smiling smugly. “Damn straight. But you still love me.”

“Regrettably.” He grumbled, wincing again as she cackled happily – clapping her hands once before she strayed to his radio and the volume rose along with their voices.

Charlotte leant on the hood of Jonathan’s car, lighting up a cigarette as she waited for her friend to get his photography folio out of the boot. She stared lazily at the school in front of her, and all the students still scurrying around like there was something important to do. She pulled off her jacket, suddenly too warm in the weak sun. Charlotte sighed, and closed her eyes behind her sunglasses; trying to ignore the impending doom, she felt pressing upon her, and the hard line of the gun pressing into her hip.

Then a revving engine – too powerful for any car she’d heard in Hawkins – caught her attention. She opened her eyes, immediately noticing the dark blue 79’ Camaro, pulling into the lot with a screeching of wheels. She wasn’t the only one. She immediately recognised Nancy and Steve hanging out of his car, squinting in the direction of the Camaro, which had just pulled up over two spots. She made to wave to them, but then the doors of the car opened, and a violently red-haired girl around Dustin’s age jumped out, scowl clear even from Charlotte’s position. She dropped a skateboard on the ground, and confirming Charlotte’s estimate, skated towards the middle school.

Then the driver got out, a boot hitting the ground first.

Charlotte gently lowered her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose as she got a good look at the fine piece of ass that got out of the car. He wasn’t quite as tall as Steve, but was broader – and she could practically see his muscles through his skin tight jeans. He was pretty – but from the way he carefully took a drag of his lit cigarette, blowing the smoke out through purposefully pursed lips – she could

tell he knew it. He looked dangerous in the way that attractive boys that knew it were.

He looked like every single bad decision rolled into one – but Charlotte couldn't help but return his smirk in her direction, carefully shifting herself so she was more lounging over the hood rather than leaning. He seemed to appreciate it, and she could practically feel his gaze as it wandered over her, assessing, assessing. Appreciating.

She winked at him, and then slid her sunglasses back up to cover her eyes, turning and snubbing her cigarette and allowing him a back-view as she headed towards Jonathan who was struggling to balance his things. She knew her assets looked good in these jeans. She chanced a look over her shoulder as she relieved Jonathan of his school books, and smirked at his retreating figure. *Did she say he was a fine piece of ass?*

“Who was that?” Jonathan panted, peeking over his stack of film balanced on his folio.

“My next meal.” Charlotte said, waggling her eyebrows at him. Jonathan sighed, and shook his head as they made their way towards the school.

“He looks like bad news, Charlie.”

“Exactly.” She snapped her teeth at him playfully. “Bad boys, am I right?”

“What’s this about bad boys, Charlotte Henderson?” Steve’s playfully stern voice didn’t dent her uplifted mood, and she even turned to grin at him as he and Nancy approached them. “I hope you’re not considering Cali Boy?” he was teasing, but there was something serious in his brown eyes that made her drop her smile.

“And if I do?” she asked, sharpening her gaze. “What’s it to ya? I’ve gotta get my kicks somehow, Harrington. We’re not all able to play Happy Families.” With that, she turned and flounced off.

It was only after she realised she had left poor, pining Jonathan with the couple did she start feeling guilty. It had been an overreaction –

though why, she couldn't say. Steve Harrington and her were supposed to be enjoying an uneasy peace. She hadn't seen Steve since the hospital, but privately, she'd resolved to forgive him, to try and mend the relationship – rebuild a friendship. Clearly she hadn't factored in how easily he seemed to get under her skin. She should probably apologize.

Charlotte sat uncomfortably through Literature, trying to mentally pen an apology.

Sorry for...

For what?

For overreacting? For still treating you like you're some dumb popular jock?

They had classes together at the end of the day – but she didn't want it to wait until then – not when she was feeling this weird uncomfortable guilt. *Lunch then.*

“Hey! Charlie!” she turned at the voice of one of her classmates. *Trisha. Tinky... T- something? Maybe?* Charlie wasn't too sure, but she smiled just the same as the dark haired girl waved her over excitedly. “Hey – oh my god, I just wanted to say I love your hair!” she squealed. Charlotte's eyes widened slightly at the volume, and at the girl's friends who were suddenly there, flanking her, nodding enthusiastically. “Um, anyway – you're coming on the weekend, right?”

“To-?” Charlotte began questioningly, but then a flyer was shoved in her face. An invitation, to ‘*Tina's Halloween Bash.*’ *Oh yeah, Tina.* “Thanks, T.” she said easily, grinning at the other girl, hoping that would be it. But of course it wasn't...

“And don't worry – Billy's totally gonna be there.” Tina trilled, giving Charlotte a knowing look. *Who-?* “He was asking who you were!

You're so lucky!"

The new boy. Right. The new boy was asking about her. Charlotte felt a small smile spread across her face. There was nothing like knowing someone was into you to give a little ego boost. Charlotte knew her body wasn't conventionally or main-stream attractive. She was a little too short, and a little too curvaceous. But clearly things were different in California. "I guess." She said, shrugging deliberately. "We'll just see what happens." Giggling, the gaggle of girls finally let her go, continuing to hand out the invitations.

Charlotte looked at hers, considering. *What could she be for Halloween?*

"HEY! LOTTIE!"

She whirled at the bellow from her brother, spotting him waving at her furiously. He was standing next to Lucas, in front of his parent's car. "WHAT?" she yelled back, ignoring the looks she was getting from some random students.

"I'M HAVING DINNER AT LUCAS' HOUSE TONIGHT!" Dustin was cupping his hands around his mouth, body almost bent with the force of his yelling. She sighed, and started jogging towards him. She shoved his head, as she passed him, winking at Lucas, and ducking her head to talk to Lucas' mother, who was smiling slightly at her approach.

"Hi Mrs. Sinclair. Sorry about him." She smiled apologetically at the beautiful woman sitting in the drivers seat.

"It's perfectly fine, Charlotte. How are you, baby?"

Charlotte tilted her head back and forth, "School is school." She said simply, making Mrs. Sinclair laugh. "Are you sure he's okay to have dinner? I can come get him before if it's too much trouble..."

"Oh no! Don't worry about it, its fine." She waved a hand airily. "Take the evening off for once!" Charlotte laughed with her, albeit, a little uneasily. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Dustin shift slightly. She didn't know just how much Dustin had told his friends and his friend's families about their life. She hated pity, and she had been doing just fine with everything for years now, and Dustin knew that. Of course, it was common knowledge that their father had done a runner when Dustin was still a baby, and their mother was almost never seen out in town anymore, so it probably wasn't hard to put two and two together, but it didn't stop her from being insecure.

"Thanks, Mrs. Sinclair. You have a good night." She stepped back before the woman could pull her further into a conversation, feeling her mood fluctuate again. Dustin waved her goodbye, still looking uncomfortable. She managed to smile at him as the car pulled out.

She stood there in the half-empty middle school parking lot, wondering what she could do. She was free. Her mother had dinner she could heat up easily already ready in the microwave, and she didn't have band practice – and even if she did, she couldn't really do anything anyway. Not while her *stupid fucking arm was-*

"Charlie. Hey." A gentle hand landed on her shoulder, and she flinched, looking up with wild eyes. Jonathan was looking down at her in concern, "You okay?"

"I-I'm-" she followed his gaze to her tightly clenched fists, and loosened them. "I'm fine." She said finally, sending him what she hoped was a convincing smile.

"You sure?" he asked her, raising a knowing eyebrow.

"Yeah, I'm cool – just... hungry." She said lamely. It wasn't a lie either. She hadn't eaten anything expect for that coffee in the morning and half of one of Steve's sandwiches he'd given her as a peace offering after their awkward apologies. Lunch had been strange just because they had a table to themselves, Nancy and Steve sitting together on one side and her and Jonathan on the other. It was going to take some getting used to.

"I'll bet." Jonathan sighed wearily. Charlotte rolled her eyes.

Jonathan had been on her case about eating regular meals since he'd actually gotten a scope for her unhealthy habits. She didn't have the heart to tell him that most of the time it was because she couldn't *afford* to eat. If she got a job, it would definitely be easier – but taking into consideration that nowhere was hiring, and the fact that she currently couldn't get a job with her arm, plus looking after Dustin and her mother was essentially a full-time job in of itself – it was proving a little impossible. Her odd shifts at the diner were out of pity, she wasn't officially on the pay-roll, but whenever there was literally no-one else available, the owner would call her. "Come for dinner."

She looked at Jonathan suspiciously. "Isn't it movie night with your mom's boyfriend?"

"Yeah... and? You know my mom loves you." Jonathan shifted his weight, and Charlotte smirked knowingly.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with wanting to avoid him?" Jonathan scoffed, but Charlotte saw right through it, and sighed. "Come on, J! I'm sure he's a good guy. You've just gotta give him a chance. I'll come if you talk to him."

"I don't gotta do anything." Jonathan muttered grumpily, but letting Charlotte link their arms as they headed towards his car.

"Oh! Charlotte! I didn't realise you were coming over..." Joyce smiled at her, sending Jonathan a questioning look over her head as Charlotte's eyes fell on Will.

"Hi, Joyce – sorry, I can go if it's a problem." Charlotte's concerned gaze followed Will as he hurried to his bedroom, head lowered. Joyce shook her head immediately.

"Of course not, darling. Its always good to see you."

"That's what I told her." Jonathan chimed in, and Charlotte slapped

him with her notebook without even looking away from Joyce, happy smile still in place. “Hey!” He shoved her, making her almost fall from the sofa. Charlotte growled at him, and leapt atop him, wrestling him flat. Joyce laughed at them, heading to the kitchen. When she was gone, Charlotte sat up slightly, still pushing on Jonathan’s forehead to keep his head pressed into the couch with her good hand – the other one being held by the wrist, Jonathan’s grip still gentle despite their play fight.

She met his eyes, playfulness fading in a second. “What’s wrong with Will?” she whispered, Jonathan’s own mirth fading.

“He always gets like this when he has a session with... *them*.” He murmured, eyes growing sad. “I don’t know how to fix it.” Charlotte let her body weight fall into him more, moving her hand to hug him instead. His grip on her bad arm shifted so that he was embracing her too, foreheads pressed together, and in the darkened space between them where her hair formed a curtain around them, Jonathan closed his eyes, pain contorting his face. Charlotte hummed softly, comfortingly. They lay there quietly, Charlotte lowering herself so that her head lay on his chest, the faint sounds of Joyce puttering in the kitchen lulling them into a false peace.

Charlotte let Jonathan up, her friend muttering something about talking to Will. She wandered into the kitchen instead, where Joyce was finishing up dinner. “How are you, Joyce?” she asked, and the woman jumped – eyes flying to Charlotte in fear, before visibly relaxing. “Sorry – I didn’t mean to scare you.” Charlotte said sheepishly, coming further into the light. She knew what it was like to be so jumpy.

“It’s fine, Charlie.” Joyce dismissed her apology, waving a hand airily. “I’m always on edge these days. You know...” she pressed her lips together, turning back to the stove.

Charlotte moved towards her, and picked up the other fry pan, neatly

flipping the schnitzel that was frying. "I know." she said quietly. "How are you sleeping?" she asked, and Joyce sighed, turning to look at her with a fond smile. The older woman reached up, and touched her cheek gently, rubbing a thumb across her cheekbone briefly. Charlotte looked at her warily.

"I should be asking you that. You need to make sure you look after yourself for a change, hmm?" Joyce said, and Charlotte felt her cheeks flush hot. "You're too sweet." Joyce cooed at her, and Charlotte had to look away before she did something more embarrassing, like lean into her touch, or hug her. "Would you set the table?" Charlotte took the out, nodding and heading for the cutlery drawer, as the front door opened.

"Hello, hello, hello!" A jovial voice called from the hall, and the way Joyce's face lit up was like something out of a rom-com. Charlotte looked away as she hurried into the open arms of a shortish man, with kind eyes and smile lines beginning to appear all over his face. "How's my favourite girl?" he asked her quietly, when they pulled apart for a moment to breathe.

"She's wonderful." Joyce smiled adoringly at him, a blush appearing on her cheeks. Charlotte sniffed, the faint smell of something burning filling the kitchen, and hurried back over to the stove to turn off the burner on the potatoes. Her movement caught the man's attention, and the smile he directed at her was just as bright.

"Hello there, I don't think we've met. I'm Bob Newby, call me Bob." He stuck out a hand to her, the other arm still wrapped around Joyce's shoulders. Charlotte took it, and shook it, feeling her lips pull up despite herself. "Who might you be?"

"I'm Charlotte Henderson, Will's friend's older sister." She supplied.

"And Jonathan's best friend." Joyce chimed in, leaning against Bob slightly. "You know... *Charlie*." Bob made a comprehending noise, and Charlotte's eyes widened as she wondered what exactly had been said in her absence. Bob whistled lowly.

"It's honour to meet a rock star..." Bob said, and grinned. "Will and Jonathan have both mentioned your band."

Charlotte's smile turned grimace like. "I'm afraid I haven't been doing much music since my arm got-"

"Into an accident." Joyce interrupted her, and Charlotte eyed her, noting her pleading expression. *So Bob didn't know.*

"Yeah. My accident." Charlotte finished slowly, hand coming up to rub at her healing arm. "Anyway. We should serve dinner, Joyce." She turned away from them, but not before she saw Bob shoot the pair of them a confused look.

Dinner was quick and easy, Will eating his food as fast as possible, and retreating straight back to his room with barely a word – just a mumbled hello and a tired, small smile in her direction. She frowned as he hurried out of the room, head lowered. Joyce made a small sound of discontent, and Jonathan's hands tightened around his cutlery. The rest of dinner was quiet, and after a while, Jonathan put his cutlery down. "I'm gonna go see what movie he wants to watch." He muttered, picking up his plate and dumping it noisily in the sink.

"I'll start packing things up." Charlotte said quietly.

"I guess I'll do popcorn?" Joyce suggested, standing with her, leaving Bob still looking slightly confused at the head of the table. "Would you help me, Bob?" The man leapt up immediately, and Charlotte hid a smile at his enthusiasm, failing as he left the room talking about a 'new video-taper' he couldn't wait to show them. He filmed Joyce closely, making her giggle like a school girl, before turning the lens on Charlotte.

"Smile for the camera!" he said, and Charlotte winked exaggeratedly, striking a pose with her hands still in the soapy water. "Wow! The colour on this thing is great!"

"Leave Charlie alone, Bob – would you go see what's taking the boys so long? Popcorn's done." Joyce laughed, tipping the popcorn into a large bowl.

Charlotte could hear raised voices from down the hall, and sighed, ducking her head slightly over the sink. But then it quietened and after a while, she heard laughter. Jonathan was a good brother. He

cared about Will, and she knew how much it had hurt him when Will was gone, how much it hurt him when Will wouldn't talk to him. Then Bob disappeared down the hall, returning a minute later with a loud whoop, a tape clutched in his hand.

"Mr. Mom it is!" he inserted the tape into the player, taking a seat on the couch immediately. Charlotte wiped her hands on the towel as Will and Jonathan emerged from Will's bedroom.

"Hey, Will." Charlotte smiled at him, instantly seeing the difference in his eyes. HE was smiling easily now, Jonathan's hand resting lightly on his shoulder. "You ready for the totally scary Halloween movie, man? Think you can *handle* the spooky?" she asked sarcastically, wiggling her fingers at him mockingly.

He rolled his eyes at her, and flounced past her. "Oh please, I've seen The Poltergeist." He said, almost sassily. Charlotte raised her eyebrows and put her hands up in surrender, turning to Jonathan.

"Damn, you've created a monster!" Charlotte said to Jonathan.

"He gets it from Dustin, and we all know where Dustin gets it from." Jonathan sent her a pointed look. Charlotte poked her tongue out at him, but accepted his arm around her neck, letting him half drag her into the living room and squash into the armchair together, as Bob and Joyce had taken up the sofa together with Will. Nervously, her eyes strayed to the slightly discoloured spot in the ceiling where the Demogorgon had come through. They'd gotten it replastered, but Charlotte could still see the cracks. "Hey." Jonathan whispered in her ear, squeezing her shoulder slightly. "Nothing's coming through anytime soon."

She looked away from the spot, realising her breathing had picked up slightly. She met his concerned gaze, and nodded compliantly, tucking her head into the crook of his neck, and avoiding the ceiling – focussing on the antics of Michael Keaton and Jonathan's steady breath. Then the phone rang, making all of them – bar Bob – jump and whip around. "Hey, it's okay. Let it go." Bob said, putting a hand on Joyce's knee. "Probably just a crank call."

Charlotte put a hand on Jonathan's chest, gently pushing him back

into the armchair – feeling the faint thudding of his heart under her fingers. “It’s okay.” She murmured to him, comforting him this time. He nodded slightly, and they both pointedly focussed their eyes back on the movie.

2. All Tricks No Treat

“YOU’RE SO CUTE!”

Dustin winced at her high pitched squeal. “Maybe this was a bad idea...” he muttered, and started to turn back towards his bedroom. Charlotte gasped in outrage, hand darting out to grab at one of the pipe connecting his makeshift ghost catcher to his jumpsuit. He slapped her hand away, looking scandalised. “Watch it! This took ages to put together!”

Charlotte backed up a step, throwing her hands up in surrender. “You have to let me get a picture. This is the best thing I have ever seen. Ever. In my life-”

“Okay! Jesus, I get it!” Dustin posed for her photos as requested, but Charlotte could *see* the murder in his eyes. She kept most of her laughter hidden, because although it was completely adorable, it was also the funniest thing she’d ever seen. Dustin’s teeth had come in recently, and Charlotte couldn’t help but smile every time he did, just because of the confidence that seemed to beam from him when he did. “C’mon, Lottie, I gotta get to school!”

“Fine, fine, fine...” Charlotte said, lowering the polaroid. “You look great!” she yelled after his retreating back and he turned to flash her a cheesy wink, which made her laugh again.

School was boring, even with the looming excitement of the party later that night. Charlie had finalized her own costume before she had swanned into school, skipping first period, much to Jonathan’s irritation, as he had to suffer through maths without her to distract him.

She felt unsettled, something churning in her stomach – though she wasn’t sure if it was excitement or nervousness, or a deep

restlessness. She should be happy at the banality of her life at the moment – if anything, it proved that the nightmares she still had were nothing more than that – just bad memories. Perhaps it was the fact that Will was still having his episodes, and Jonathan was growing more broken every time Steve and Nancy paraded their affection in front of him, or the fact that her dad's child support cheque hadn't come in the mail, and their funds were slowly running dry. If the cheque didn't come in the next few days they could be in trouble. They couldn't rely solely on her mother's meagre disability cheque forever – the government didn't provide much. The bills of the house plus her mother's medication were more expensive than the cheque value. If it didn't come then she'd either have to try and find more work, sell some things, or... call her father. And she would rather shoot herself in the leg with Jonathan's (her) gun.

A hand fell on her wrist, and she twitched, eyes flicking up to where Steve's eyes were watching her in concern. She looked down to where his eyes darted. The notes she were supposed to be writing during their study period were illegible, nervous scratches, and tears straight through the paper where her pencil had dug too deeply in her contemplation. She hissed at herself, dropping her pencil, and running a hand over the page regretfully. Steve smiled slightly, opening his mouth to say something,

Nancy sighed loudly, and they both turned to look at her, catching the edge of her irritated look as she stood up suddenly, walking over to the pencil sharpener. As if burnt, Steve retracted his hand, and cleared his throat. "Um. I can give you mine to use if you like." He offered, avoiding her gaze.

Despite herself, Charlotte felt her mouth twitch up into a smile. "Are you sure? I can just rewrite it... I don't want to inconvenience you." it came out warmer than she expected, a faint fluttering feeling of fondness surprising her.

At the sound of her slightly touched tone, he met her gaze, brown eyes playful but earnest. "No, it's cool. I copied them from Nancy anyway, they don't really make sense to me." As he said his girlfriend's name, his eyes wandered in her direction, Charlotte following his gaze. Both of them sobered at the faraway look in Nancy's eyes and the frantic movements of her hands as she

mechanically sharpened her pencil.

Steve made a low noise of worry and stood, leaving Charlotte alone at the table as he hurried over to Nancy – the pair of them disappearing into the private reading room after a quiet exchange. After what looked like a heated exchange, Steve moved suddenly and lowered the blinds, effectively blocking them from her sight. Charlotte closed her eyes briefly. She felt useless. She couldn't alleviate Jonathan's pain any more than she could alleviate Nancy's – but at least Jonathan was confiding in her. Nancy and her hadn't talked properly in a long while. And it made her sadder than she had expected. They hung out, they ate lunch together, but after the revelation at the gym so many months ago now, she thought that they'd be closer than they were.

She started gathering up her things. Knowing the couple, they would be in there for a while. She should go and find Jonathan, and see if she could convince him to come to the party after all.

Richard and Edward came by later than she expected, so by the time they pulled up to Tina's house, drunk teenagers were already spilling out onto the streets, music pumping loudly. Charlotte got out carefully, not too confident in the strength of the seams of her costume.

Richard slammed the door behind him and ran a hand through the mussed half of his hair. Richard's Harvey Twoface costume was perfect, down to the carefully done burn scarring on half of his face, and the two-toned suit he was wearing. They'd glued down half of his hair with wax, mussing the other half over his 'crazy' half. Edward did the same, however they'd gelled his hair to give it a greasier wet look, and spray painted it green, which was only just apparent on his dark brown hair. his white face paint and dark eyeshadow was messily applied, but the large red smile they'd painted on him was just as eerie as the rest of his appearance. His purple and green suit was maybe a size too small, but it didn't matter – not when the

overall effect was so spot on.

Charlotte bit her lip, looking at her appearance in the car window, trying to examine her dim reflection. For all her bluster – the costume was... tight. In a way she wasn't used to. Richard's hand fell on her shoulder. "You look great, Charlie. Don't worry."

"Yeah, *chica*. Just put on that mask and let's get going." Edward grinned at her, elongated by his Joker makeup. Charlotte breathed a sigh, and pulled on the leather mask, tugging her hair out the bottom so it sat nicely around her shoulders, and turned to the two boys. They whistled appreciatively, and Charlotte smirked as a flood of confidence hit her. She could do this.

The Catwoman costume was skin-tight in faux leather that shone like PVC, equipped with a prop whip, belt and even a tail that swung freely behind her, swaying slightly as she walked because of the heeled boots that came as part of the costume. As they stepped through the door, she became aware of a chanting cry of "*BILLY!*"

The new boy.

She changed course, weaving her way through the crowded living room towards the kitchen where she hoped she'd find alcohol. Her eyes alighted immediately on a row of shot glasses and a bottle of tequila sitting unattended. "Boys?!" she yelled over the din, handing Richard and Edward a glass each. With a loud caw of excitement, they clinked their glasses together, before downing the burning liquid. Charlotte winced, fighting the coughing gag that Richard had succumbed to, his eyes streaming, even as he held out the glass for a top-up. Charlotte laughed away the after taste, and downed another two shots in quick succession, before she turned towards the surge of dancers, letting Edward tug her with them into the throng.

Charlotte had scored another couple of drinks on the dancefloor, and was already feeling the effects of the alcohol, warm in her costume,

but loose – tilting her head back to try and feel some sort of air on her exposed throat and chest. The costume’s zipper had been tugged down a little further by some excited girls who had gushed over C.H.E.R.R.Y’s coordinated costume, before two of them had cornered Richard and Edward, leaving Charlotte alone in the middle of the dancefloor. She didn’t mind though – too free to care, as the music pounded through her bones.

A pair of hands appeared at her hips, slowly sliding to encircle as much of her waist as possible, before turning her in place. She blinked slightly, taking in the amount of glistening skin and muscle presented to her. As her gaze made its way up the exposed cut torso of the very boy she was intending to meet, she realised that she’d been moved closer to him, her breasts brushing slightly against his torso. She also noticed that his eyes were firmly affixed on her exposed cleavage, and snorted. “Eyes up here.”

“Sorry, just taking in the full package, Miss Kitty.” He replied smoothly, blue eyes alight in satisfaction. “I’ve been waiting to properly meet you for a while now, Charlotte Henderson. You’re a hard girl to track down.”

Charlotte smiled slowly, shrugging. “It’s part of my charm. You’ve got me now.”

“And are you all mine?” He asked curiously, leaning closer to her, something predatory falling over his eyes.

Charlotte hummed, drunk – but not so much that she ignored the faint alarm bells ringing at the intense and expectant way he was bearing down on her. “We’ll just have to see.” She murmured, and leant back slightly, “After you get me a drink.”

Billy’s jaw tightened briefly as she put a hand to his chest, pushing slightly. His expression cleared quickly, however, and a playful smirk grew over his handsome face. “Well, you lead the way – no running off on me now.”

Charlotte grinned approvingly, and turned to make her way back through the crowd, her fingers linked with his – aware of his hot gaze on her ass. And if her intoxicated self, put a little extra swing in her

hips as she walked, she didn't see the harm in it. For all her talk about *him* getting her a drink, she mixed it herself, heat pooling in her stomach as he crowded her from behind, one hand firmly settled in the dip of her waist and hip, and the other running up her arm to her jaw, and tilting her head. She bit her lip, fighting a smile as his lips settled on her exposed neck under her mask. In the less crowded and better lit kitchen she felt a little better about it, free from the haze and packed closeness of the dancefloor, she felt a little more sober. A little more certain about her decision. Billy Hargrove may have been an asshole, but he was hot. And he clearly wanted her, if his insistent attention was anything to go by – and Charlotte hadn't felt particularly wanted... ever.

So she took a deep swig of his drink, and turned in place, the kitchen bench hard against the small of her back. With her face so close to his, she could faintly smell the beer on his skin, mixed with some sharp cologne. It was nothing like the subtle expensive stuff Steve usually wore, which was much pleasanter and was almost comforting though-

She mentally recoiled as her thoughts turned unbidden to Steve.

Billy smiled down at her, and she released her bottom lips from where her teeth had it caught and leant forwards. He met her halfway, mouth wet and hot against hers. She reached up, winding her hands around his neck. He made a pleased sound, and his hands made their way down to her ass, gripping it for a second, before lifting her slightly, and setting her on the bench behind them. Charlotte made an involuntary noise as he surged forwards, settling himself firmly in-between her legs, and opening her mouth with his own. Their tongues met sloppily, and Charlotte's hands fluttered at the nape of his neck, her legs tightening around his hips. Maybe it was the alcohol but it felt like Billy was *everywhere*. She pulled back for a second as his lips made their way to her neck again, and tugged off her mask impatiently. He smiled – all teeth – and went back to it, and she gasped as he sucked a mark under her jaw, nipping down her neck.

"D'ya wanna take this upstairs?" he murmured, just under her ear, sucking another hickey there. She hummed, not really thinking at this point. She may have drunk too much too fast. "Great." He said

lowly, and pulled back, tugging her with him. She let him walk her towards the staircase, ignoring the suggestive whoops from some kids still sober enough to process their coupling.

Then Billy's face lit up in sadistic glee, and he changed course, pressing her to his side as he did so. Tommy H appeared out of nowhere, sending her a leering smile. She scowled at him, processing who they were heading to a second too late.

"We got ourselves a new keg king, Harrington." Tommy crowed maliciously, leaning in close to Steve. Nancy was beside him, looking faintly pained. Her eyes widened as they fell upon Charlotte – who offered the other girl a smile. At least she hoped it was a smile. It may have been a grimace, due to the sudden clamour from the boys around her.

Steve reached up, pulling off his sunglasses with a decisive flick of his wrist, eyes darting to her. "You right there, Lottie?" he asked seriously, barely restrained anger in his eyes.

Billy looked down at her, at the same time she looked at him, and he took advantage of the angle of her face to press a kiss to her lips again, more show than actual substance. "She's doing just fine." He responded to Steve, looking back at the brunet with something taunting satisfaction in his eyes.

"Lottie?" Steve ignored him, and the gravity of his eyes on her made something warm tickle her stomach again – nothing like the heat that she had been feeling with Billy. No this was weirdly warm and familiar. Comfortable. Irrationally she thought of the smell of his cologne and that odd floral scent and resisted the urge to lean forwards to see if he smelt like it again.

"I'm fine, Harrington." She said instead, smiling winningly.

Nancy rolled her eyes and slipped away. The boys started up again as she left, and not wanting to be a part of the tense atmosphere anymore, she followed the other girl, catching up to her and slipping an arm around her waist. Nancy started in surprise, but relaxed as she realised who was holding her. "Hey, Charlie. Having fun?" she asked politely.

Charlotte nodded, head movement stilted and jerky in her drunken state. Nancy laughed softly, before her face tightened. "Listen, where can I get a drink?"

"You just follow me, m'lady." Charlotte said brightly, and steered the other girl back to where she had come from, and stopped her in front of the array of alcohol, gesturing proudly. Nancy's eyes landed on the ominous looking punch.

"What's in this?" she asked, leaning over it slightly – nose wrinkling at the pungent smell.

Charlotte grinned widely. "Pure fuel, baby! Pure fuel!" she grabbed a pair of red solo cups as Nancy giggled again, and started pouring them each a cup. They cheered as they banged the cups together, both of them beginning to chug it. Charlotte gagged again at the intense sweetness mingling with overpowering taste of innumerable alcohol.

"Hey! Hey! Hey! Whoa, whoa, whoa! Take it easy. Nance, Nance. Nance!" Steve appeared out of nowhere, hand darting out to stop Nancy's drinking. Charlotte halted her own chugging, to stare at the couple as Nancy stumbled back from him.

"We're just being stupid teenagers for the night. Wasn't that the deal?" Nancy said sharply, and turned away from Steve's slightly hurt expression to refill her cup. Charlotte knew she was missing something as Steve clenched his jaw, and Nancy defiantly drank down her second cup and stormed off into the crowd.

Charlotte put down her cup and moved closer to him uncertainly, as he leant over the bench staring unseeingly at the crowd in front of him. "Hey, Harrington – is everything okay with you and Nancy?"

Steve sighed heavily, turning to fix her with a slightly baleful look. "And you really care because...?"

Charlotte recoiled slightly. "Okay – I deserve that, yeah." She could admit that she had never been particularly supportive of the relationship that had re-unfurled in front of her. But she was perfectly happy to let Steve think it was because she didn't

particularly care for him, as opposed to her just being fiercely loyal to her broken hearted best friend. However, her drunk brain didn't seem to care about rational-Charlotte's loyalties, so instead her gut twisted at the thought of Steve thinking she *still* hated him, and she blurted the first thing that came to mind. "Listen, Harrington. I care. I *care*... about you, *man*." She said awkwardly. "But I mean... do you even really... like... jell? Anymore?"

Steve's face twisted and she knew she had fucked up. "It doesn't matter. *I love her*." he said fiercely. "I don't care that you care. About me." He said, voice wavering slightly. "We're fine. We're fucking fine. Why don't you go and find *King Billy* and suck him off or something." He spat derisively, and the anger she had seen restrained earlier, leapt to life, turning his warm brown eyes dark. She took a second to re-align her centre of balance as she had leant away from him as he had yelled at her. Then just as Nancy had, she downed her drink and stalked away from him. She missed how his body slouched as she turned away from him, hunching down in defeat.

Nancy and her danced wildly, both of them laughing after they had shrieked their anger at Steve Harrington into the senseless noise of the room, voices lost to the noise from the other partiers and loud music.

"I fucking *hate* this song!" Charlotte slurred, but didn't cease her dancing, hands tight around Nancy's waist. Nancy just made a groaning noise in acknowledgement, hair jumping around wildly as she jerked her head back and forth to the beat. Charlotte was drunkenly and pleasantly surprised to find that Nancy had zero rhythm, and was therefore the worst dancer on the floor. But she looked like she was having a blast so Charlotte couldn't find it in herself to laugh at it – instead, throwing her head back just as slackly, and dancing with her friend.

"I need another drink." Nancy said, tilting forwards to say it in her ear, breath hot and heavy against her neck. Charlotte fought a shiver,

and nodded, releasing her, and dancing alone. It was when she spun, facing the way her back had been turned to – did she finally notice Jonathan, talking to a girl in a crazy black wig.

She waved excitedly, and caught his eye. His eyebrows lifted dramatically, and he gave her a once over, with a bemused smile on his face. Finally he lifted a hand to give her a thumbs up. realising he meant her costume, she clapped giddily, and turned in a circle for his full inspection. He grinned at her, as she met his gaze again, and said something to the wigged girl, before he started heading towards her. Charlotte's joy at seeing her friend quickly dissipated at the sound of raised voice from behind her. She turned just in time to see Nancy's drink spill out all over her white top. "Shit." She said lowly, as he grabbed at Nancy again, before the girl stormed away, Steve following her quickly.

"Hey- what?" Jonathan's greeting turned into worry quickly at the look on her face. "What's up?"

"Nancy..." Charlotte said anxiously. "I don't think she's okay." As Jonathan got ready to mobilize, panic and determination settling across his open face, Charlotte lifted a hand tiredly. "Steve's with her though. Sorry, lover boy." She winced at the faint hurt and sadness that marred his features almost instantly. "I'm sorry, J – I didn't mean..." she dropped her hand.

"It's okay." Jonathan said softly, sending her a small smile. *It wasn't.*

Charlotte cursed herself inwardly, swaying slightly. She was too drunk – but she didn't know where Edward and Richard were to take her home, and Jonathan had just gotten here. She was torn. But her decision was made for her as Steve came out of nowhere, head bowed and face set – something suspiciously like tears shining in his eyes. But without Nancy. He stalked past them, heading for the door and slamming it behind him.

"Well..." Jonathan began, looking awkwardly between the bathroom and Steve's exit. Charlotte sighed.

"You get Nancy home."

“What about you?” Jonathan didn’t miss the slight unbalance to her movement or the haziness of her gaze. But she shot him a smile.

“I’ll be fine, J. I’ll see you soon, yeah?” She didn’t give him a chance to protest, waving him goodbye as she headed towards where Steve had disappeared. She didn’t get far though – an arm snaking around her waist and tugging her off course. She thudded into a solid chest, and looked up into Billy’s face feeling a strong sense of déjà vu.

“And where are you going?” he asked huskily, lowering his face towards hers. She let him kiss her for a minute before she disentangled herself.

“I gotta go.”

“Already?” he asked, moving to follow her – but she stayed him with a hand to his chest, relishing the firmness under her fingers for a moment, before she pushed him slightly. “Aw, come on... we were having fun.”

“We were.” She admitted, smiling slightly. “But I really do have to go. I’ll see you around, Billy.” Maybe it was a mark of how drunk he was that he let her leave, but she did see how his gaze wandered to a girl walking by in a bikini top and hula skirt before he did so.

It was cold outside, even in her cat suit, and she shivered slightly as she traipsed over the lawn to where Steve was sitting.

He looked small, sitting alone in the moonlight, shoulders hunched and head bowed. She bit her lip as she saw his shoulders shake slightly, but didn’t falter, and dropped down beside him, wrapping her arms around her knees to hide from the cold wind.

“It’s freezing out here.” She said stupidly, and he tensed beside her, sucking in an audible shaky breath.

“Why are you here?” Steve asked, voice muffled.

She shrugged, even though he couldn't see her. "Because even though you don't believe it. I do care." She offered.

He raised his head at that, and she realised that he *had* actually been crying. His eyes were slightly red, and there were tear tracks on his cheeks. Her throat tightened at the sight. For a second, boyish features made ambiguous by the alcohol in her system, and the silvery moonlight, he had resembled her brother. Then she blinked and the illusion was gone. But the concerned feeling didn't vanish. "I fucked up. Bad." He said lowly, lowering his head slightly.

"What's wrong, Harrington?" she asked softly.

Steve blinked furiously, clearly fighting more tears, as he turned away from her, looking up at the moon. "Nancy... isn't really coping with Barb's death – but she doesn't understand-! We can't tell her family the truth... those *people*... they'd, they'd-" he groaned, unable to find the words. "I just wanted her to be happy. To not think about it for one night. And I thought that was why she's been distant lately but she..." he choked up. Charlotte belatedly raised her arm and rubbed at his back, and he leant into her touch, eyes flickering closed. "She told me that I'm bullshit. That our *love* is *bullshit*."

Charlotte winced. Steve, for as long as she'd known him – had worn his heart on his sleeve, and he'd carried a torch for Nancy longer than the other girl knew. He had always put his whole self into everything he did, eating, basketball, partying... *love*. She may not have liked him for a long while, but she had always respected his passion for the things he loved. And he loved a lot, but he loved hard – and true. But this was also the first time that *Steve* had had his heart broken. She had never thought she'd be there for it.

He sighed, opening his eyes, and affixed her with a guilty look. "I don't even know why I'm telling you all this." He tilted his head, considering her. "But you've always been a good listener. A good friend. Maybe not to me *before*, but then again, I wasn't exactly a stellar guy..."

"When I said I wanted to be friends, Steve, I mean it." She said quietly. "You saved my life. And you've changed. We both have." They sat silently for a moment before he pressed his lips together.

"I'm sorry." He whispered.

Charlotte looked at him questioningly. "For what... for what I said before." He said haltingly. Charlotte tilted her head. He had been rude in the kitchen, but not entirely untruthful – which is why it hurt so much, she supposed.

"It's alright. But for what its worth – I don't think I'll be sucking Billy off anytime soon." She smiled slightly, just so he would too – but his was tight.

"I don't just mean in the kitchen. I mean for everything I said before that too."

Charlotte looked away from him. She didn't want the reminder of how cruel he could be. She didn't want the reminder of her family life right then either, all too aware of how she had been suppressing her worries all night. But this was... closure. Of a sort. "Its alright." She said again, barely loud enough to be heard.

But Steve just shook his head. "It's not." He murmured. His hand landed on her hand that was still holding her own legs, and met her gaze. "But I'm going to make it better, Lottie. Believe me. I want to be better." His eyes were intense, and she felt that warmth again, and suddenly the wind didn't seem so cold. She breathed in a shallow breath.

"Steve-"

The slamming of the front door behind them made them jump apart. Her hand left his shoulder and his grip left her other hand. They turned, to see Jonathan balancing a drunk Nancy in his arms as he headed towards his car. She didn't have to look to see Steve's tight face as he made a pained noise. As Jonathan pulled out of the driveway and headed down the street, Steve turned to face the empty street in front of them, face set. "What were you going to say?" she watched him dash his fingers under his eyes quickly, feeling pity settle in her like a stone. She didn't even know what she had been trying to vocalise before, and sighed.

"Take me home, Harrington." She said instead.

3. Fresh Wound

“Can you just take Will to school, *please*.”

Jonathan gave an impatient jerk of his head. “I gotta go get Charlie.”

“I can take him.” Bob’s voice chimed in and Jonathan fought the urge to roll his eyes. He was in a bad mood, something to do with the lack of sleep over the weekend, and the fact that he had a couple of tests coming up, and Nancy was *still* with Steve, and-

He rubbed at his eyes tiredly as the house went silent, alone as the respective adults and Will rushed out.

He’d been having nightmares lately.

Bad ones.

They left him wide awake late at night, fear coursing through his veins, sweat drying cold on his skin. It was hard to dismiss them as bad memories when his imagination kept changing the outcome. Sometimes the Demogorgon leapt at him, and he was alone in his living room, and it tore him to pieces. Sometimes Steve didn’t appear, and he had to watch as Charlotte was ripped to shreds, her blood turning the dream red. Sometimes he even had to watch Nancy fall, and that was the hardest to watch. Almost as hard as dreaming about her and himself, *together*, and waking up to remember that she wasn’t his.

It had to mean something that she had called out for him last night, right? He hadn’t spoken to Charlotte since the party, but already knew she’d be dying for details.

Speaking of his friend, he was going to make them both late if he didn’t get his ass moving.

Jonathan honked once in Charlotte's driveway, dutifully ignoring the evil eye her neighbour was giving him. Apparently she looked at everyone under the age of 25 like that, no matter what they were doing – so he paid her no mind. A second later, Charlotte appeared in the doorway, waving at him brightly. He zeroed in on the mug she was clutching, lips pursing.

She needed to eat more – he was almost certain that her diet consisted of coffee and not much else. But today he was prepared. He looked at the brown paper bag in the passenger seat, making sure he'd grabbed the right one. He didn't know how Charlotte would feel about Will's lunch, which usually had one of his weird sandwiches in it – peanut butter and celery being an odd favourite.

She was wearing a violently yellow sweater, horizontally striped with burnt orange, coordinating with her yellow converse and her favourite jeans. It was still strange to see her out of her leather jacket and dark pants, with her light hair. But her sunglasses were the same, and she was wearing them as usual, obscuring her eyes from him – but her smile was no less bright. She swung open the car door, draining her mug as she did so, pausing to set it down on the driveway beside the car, and catching sight of the paper bag as she did so.

"What's this?" she asked curiously, pushing up her glasses, dumping her bag in the back seat and sitting down, turning over the bag. "Did your mom pack you lunch, J?" she asked teasingly. Jonathan saw the exact second where she realised what it was. It was almost comical the way her eyes widened and her mouth snapped shut. As if someone had just dunked her in cold water, she shrank in on herself slightly, fingers clutching onto the bag tightly. "For me?" she asked softly, and Jonathan's chest panged painfully at the wondering tone to her voice.

"Um. Yeah. I just... I don't know..." he coughed, cheeks suddenly flaming hot at her intense stare on the side of his face. "I just assumed you didn't bring anything today."

"I don't remember the last time someone packed me a lunch." She said, still in that unbearably soft voice. Jonathan reached over without looking and ruffled her platinum hair, which made her laugh

quietly. She cleared her throat, and reached up to slide her sunglasses back into place, and unfurled in the seat reaching for the radio and flicking it on. "Damn, I feel like I'm in middle school all over again." she said jokingly, but Jonathan noted that she didn't release her tight grip on the bag, drawing it closer to her chest when she thought he wasn't looking. He hid his smile, running a hand over his chin as she started belting the lyrics to the WHAM! song playing.

Charlotte exited her classroom with her stomach growling, actually looking forwards to her lunch period, lips turning up in a smile at the thought of her lunch bag.

She was used to making the lunches, and she usually packed Dustin's lunch for him – excepting when he wanted to make his own, when he was feeling particularly defiant and independent. It wasn't practical for her to make her own, not when their budget was tight, and usually she could wait until dinner. But not today. Today was a good day. Charlotte was not used to being taken care of unconditionally like that, and it felt... nice.

The yellow sweater she had picked out that morning was also strangely adding to her good mood, as well as the fact that whatever gossip that was circulating from the night was mostly centred on Steve and Nancy's fight, rather than anything about her and Billy. She hadn't seen Billy at all, though she hadn't really expected to, due to the fact that had no classes together, and his lunch period was at a different time to hers. As she unlocked her locker, she heard more of the same, two girls from her English class laughing about Steve's upheaval from the 'king position', and his 'totally embarrassing' fight with Nancy.

She pursed her lips, slamming her locker door shut, making them jump and look over at her warily. She shot them a sweet smile. "Maybe you should consider your totally embarrassing hair cut instead." She said pleasantly, smile turning vicious at the shocked gasp from the pair.

As if they had summoned him with their words, Steve stormed past, hair wet and shirt damp around the collar. She watched him in concern as he angrily opened his locker, dumping his gym bag inside and grabbing his lunch. Clearly he was still in a bad mood from last night. He had seemed quiet but marginally calmer when he had dropped her home, but something must have set him off during gym. If she had to hedge a bet, she would say it was either something to do with Billy or with Nancy.

Despite the faint desire to keep her good mood intact, she couldn't help but follow him down the hall as he headed for the front door, presumably to eat lunch outside. She had to jog slightly to keep up with his pace.

"Harrington." She said amicably. He didn't answer, muttering something to himself. She sighed. "HARRINGTON!"

"Huh?" he started, turning to face her. His face did a funny little dance, confusion and surprise morphing into a faintly pleased expression. "Oh, hey, Charlotte."

"Hey. Are you... alright?" she asked hesitantly. He scowled, as they passed Tommy H and the freckled boy gave him a little wave and blew Charlotte a kiss, wagging his eyebrows. Charlotte raised an eyebrow at him as Steve pushed open the door for them.

"I'm... fine." He said shortly, making a beeline for his car. Charlotte made a disbelieving noise, and he sighed, stopping in place with his hand on the car handle. "Well. No. I'm not."

Charlotte nudged him with her elbow as she moved around to the passenger side. "Tell me about it, stud." Steve smiled weakly, and they got into his car.

"It's just..." he clearly needed no further convincing to spill his guts, and Charlotte sat quietly through the tirade, eating her sandwich thoughtfully. She had even managed to finish her apple by the time he seemed to run out of steam, panting slightly. He grimaced as he turned to look at her. "Sorry. You're probably sick of hearing about my shit."

Charlotte offered him a small smile. "It's fine. I don't mind listening. My brother's drama is often a lot more tiring." She chuckled. "You haven't heard shit until you've heard a middle schooler's plan to win the girl of his dreams or to achieve world domination."

Steve laughed, "Your brother sounds like a cool dude."

Charlotte smiled in pleasure. "He is! He's super smart, he's topping his classes and still has time to spend hours on this game, Dungeons and Dragons – which is all about imagination. He's really creative. If anyone from this stupid town will make out, it'll be him for sure. He's brilliant."

Steve was watching her, something warm in his eyes. "You really care about him, huh?"

"Yeah, well... he's my brother, of course I love him." Charlotte said slowly, raising an eyebrow at him.

Steve shook his head, "Just because he's family, doesn't mean you have to care about him like that. Trust me. Family is just a word." His eyes were distant.

"Don't I know it." Charlotte muttered. Steve seemed to realise what he had inferred and winced.

"I didn't mean- ah shit. I keep saying all the wrong shit-"

"Hey!" Charlotte raised a hand to stop his frantic apology. Her father's absconding was hardly new news. And at this point, people could probably infer that she was the one running the Henderson household. "It's alright. I mean, I'm fine. It's not... a fresh wound." She phrased awkwardly, hand coming up absently to rub at her arm as her gaze focussed on the school out the window behind him.

Steve's eyes followed her movement. "How is your arm? You haven't been playing much." he said. Charlotte frowned slightly, unsure why he would know that, but she shrugged, and pulled up the sleeve of the sweater.

The scarring tissue was still an angry red, shiny and raised. Steve sucked in a hissing breath, and Charlotte met his gaze, smiling

reassuringly. "It's alright. It doesn't hurt as much anymore. Mostly just aches when I move it weird."

Steve stretched out a hand, stopping short of her skin, and shot her an apologetic look. "Sorry- can I...?"

She shrugged again. "If you want. It's kind of gross." Steve made a disgruntled noise, but stretched out and ran his fingers lightly over her marred skin. His face tightened as he did so, watching her shiver slightly, an involuntary reaction to his gentle touch. "What?" she asked softly.

His hand moved down her arm, fingers wrapping around her wrist and holding her hand. He didn't look at her, still tracing the lines with his eyes. As the silence stretched on, Charlotte felt self-consciousness rise in her, sour in the back of her throat, and reached for her sleeve, trying to tug it down. "It's not gross." He said suddenly, voice low. Charlotte stopped her movement, stilling as he looked up at her through his lashes, brown eyes painfully vulnerable. "It's a reminder. It's a reminder of how shitty I was. If I had stayed... if I hadn't been a coward, if I hadn't left – you wouldn't have these."

Charlotte blinked rapidly. "Steve..." she murmured, unsure how to tackle the tense atmosphere between them, the weight hanging over both of them.

He smiled wanly. "You never call me that."

"What?" She asked dumbly.

"Steve." He repeated, still smiling in that tired, sad way. Charlotte felt her heart skip a beat.

"Steve." She tried again. The bell rang loudly, audible through the car windows. Steve abruptly released her wrist and she tugged down her sleeve, both of them looking away from each other. Charlotte coughed. "I, um. I have class." She said nervously. Steve nodded.

"Yeah. Me too."

He didn't move, so Charlotte took action, and swung open the door, but before she walked off she stuck her head back inside, startling

him. "See you round? My house is always open if you need to talk more."

Steve looked faintly surprised, but nodded. "Thanks. Yeah, I'll see you round, Charlotte."

4. Rumours

Charlotte felt sure she was missing something – the looks and whispers she was getting in the corridor the next day weren't doing wonders for her confidence, but above all, the unsettling leers from Tommy H and the gang of hangers on that always seemed to be leeching off some popularity, were creeping her out.

Her questions were answered when she rounded the corner to her locker, and saw Billy Hargrove leaning against her locker, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. She raised an eyebrow, swallowing the discomfort rising in her stomach. "You know you'll get detention for smoking inside." She said, stopping in front of him.

"It's not lit." he said casually, eyeing her strangely.

Charlotte sighed, and tapped her foot. "Would you get off my locker? I kinda need stuff in there."

"Easy, pretty kitty." He stepped back, an amused look flashing on his face. "Listen," she didn't, turning her face from him, stuffing her books in her locker and trying to remember what she'd need for fifth period. "-take you out."

"What?" she whirled, focussing back on his voice immediately.

"Well, you know how well we got on at Tina's..." He bit his lip suggestively, stepping into her space. Charlotte was lost. *What the hell was going on?* "I say we, uh, go for round two." She blinked at him, and he smirked. "Come on, Charlotte, I'll pick you up tonight and we can go for a drive."

"Um. Yeah. Sure. Whatever you want." She said hurriedly, as the bell rang loudly. Before she could react, he leant in, and pressed a kiss to her mouth before stepping away – and sauntering down the corridor. Charlotte stayed very still, all too aware of the whispers that had started up around her. And she was alone. Jonathan and Nancy weren't at school, and she felt heat rise in her cheeks – unsure why the boys were leering, and the girls were muttering.

“Charlotte.” She turned at a familiar voice, spotting Steve approaching from the opposite direction. “Alright?”

“Yeah. Walk me to class?” she asked desperately, hurriedly falling into step with him, putting him in between the students and her. He looked at her in concern but didn’t ask, simply walking to her classroom with her, and just as he was about to leave, he looked at her.

“Hey, do you know if... did Jonathan pick you up today?” he asked hurriedly, something playing in his eyes. Charlotte shook her head slowly,

“No, Richard did. Why?” She said. Steve’s face tightened, and some dark emotion flashed across his face. It worried her, and she wondered if the rumours were true. “Steve, did you and Nancy break-”

“Can I come over after school?” He interrupted her, looking desperate. Charlotte snapped her mouth shut, realising what had happened. Mutely, she nodded. “Thanks.” He muttered. “I’ll drive you home.” He was gone before she could respond, and she watched his retreating form, concern fluttering in his throat.

So Nancy and Steve were really done.

And clearly he thought Jonathan and Nancy were together – but she was not going to be the one to tell him that they were. Jonathan hadn’t told her what they were doing, just that it had something to do with closure for Barb. Whilst she was happy for her friends, she couldn’t help but worry for Steve. He’d been violently thrust into lower social status and on top of that – he had broken up with Nancy.

It was good that he was coming over. Maybe he could talk some more about it, get it out of his system...

Charlotte bit her lip as she remembered that Billy would be coming round.

Idiot.

What exactly was she going to do?

Charlotte went through the rest of her day distractedly – to the point where Richard and Edward stopped playing in the middle of the song they were practicing. Charlotte continued singing the next lyric, so zoned out she didn't realise they'd stopped. In was the awkward silence that made her put down the mic she was holding, and she turned to face them. "What?" she demanded. She still wasn't playing guitar, she hadn't found one to use – and it didn't look like she'd be able to buy one in the near future.

"What's wrong with you today?" Edward asked snippily, raising an eyebrow at her.

Richard cleared his throat from behind the drum-kit, shooting Edward a reproachful look. "Are you alright, Charlie?" he asked gently. "Is there something on your mind?"

Charlotte pursed her lips. "Um. No?" it came out as a question, not a statement, and Edward pounced.

"Is it that Hargrove guy? Do we need to... *talk* to him?" he asked, gaze darkening. "Or is it Harrington?"

Charlotte clicked her tongue angrily. "Why do you assume it's boy problems?"

Edward raised his eyebrow again, looking faintly amused. "When is it not?"

Charlotte flipped him off, and stood up, heading for her water bottle in the corner. "Well, if you *must* know – I've actually got a date with Billy tonight. But that's not... that's not the problem."

"So there is something wrong." Richard said, leaning over his snare towards her, blue eyes earnest. "What's eatin' ya?"

Charlotte sighed. "Its just-I don't know. Nancy and Jonathan. And Steve. It's kinda tangled and weird."

“And why are you tangled and weird? Last time I checked, you weren’t any of those three people.” Edward said, tuning his bass.

Charlotte scowled at him. “Unlike you, Ed, some of us have empathy.”

“Does it have anything to do with your accident?” Richard asked quietly. Charlotte tensed. She hadn’t told her band members what had happened, for obvious reasons – being intensely vague about the cause of her arm injury. All they knew was that the other three teens had been involved somehow – because they’d all been at the hospital when they’d visited. Whilst Edward skated over the topic, due to the fact that he was extremely unsympathetic – Richard, as was his nature, tended to treat Charlotte like glass.

“It- it doesn’t matter. Sorry. I’ll focus.” She said lowly. Edward sighed dramatically, and she looked up in time to see him rolling his eyes. “What, Edward?” she snapped. She had never been as close to the boy as Richard, but since her blue with Tommy and her subsequent friendship with Nancy, Jonathan and Steve, they’d been terser with each other than usual – and ever since the Halloween party, he’d been subtly ignoring her. She thought that some twisted, nasty part of her blamed him for letting her leave Barb that night.

“Oh, nothing. Just wondering if you can manage to pull your head out of your ass to focus.” He said nonchalantly. Charlotte looked at him in disbelief, and Richard went quiet, ducking his head. “Charlotte, it’s obvious that you’re not as interested in the band now that you’ve gotten some attention. You’re all caught up in your own little drama – and honestly, we both think you’re unmotivated.”

“Wh-what?” Charlotte stuttered, looking to Richard, who was dutifully ignoring her gaze. “Richard?”

Edward stood. “Look, whilst we were away we met some guys who are thinking of starting a *serious* band.”

“This is serious? What do you mean?” Charlotte was struggling to process his words, looking between them. “You guys aren’t...”

“Listen, the music world is... well – you wouldn’t fit in.” Edward

said, smiling patronisingly. “We got scouted. You didn’t.”

“Yeah – because you didn’t invite me along! What is going on? Richard, seriously – tell me this is bullshit! I thought that our music meant something to you guys!” Charlotte was yelling now, a sinking feeling making her throat tighten. Richard still didn’t meet her eyes.

“It did.” Edward said with a note of finality. “We can keep this going until the end of the year, but then we’re heading back to Chicago. We know you need the money.”

“Fuck you.” Charlotte snapped. She stood up so violently that the mic stand and her stool fell over with a loud bang. “Fuck *both* of you.”

“I’m sorry, Charlotte.” Richard’s voice was quiet. She just gave him a baleful look, and levelled her gaze at Edward, who was staring unapologetically back. “We were going to tell you, but-”

“Oh spare me.” Charlotte spat. “I’ll see you round, assholes. Don’t pick me up tomorrow.”

She stormed out, swallowing a feeling of panic.

“Hey, hey, hey! Lottie – Charlotte! Slow down!”

It took Steve yelling from his car window for Charlotte to slow down. She halted and rounded on him, and watched him recoil slightly at the sight of her set face, angry tears still sliding down her cheeks. She’d just managed to hold in her tears through last period – but as the school bell had rung, she had only just made it to her locker before they began to spill over, and so she’d hurried for the exit, striding furiously through the carpark towards home.

“Jesus, what happened?” Steve stopped the car, ignoring the angry toot from the kid behind him, and got out, hurrying over to her. Charlotte just shook her head, but let him guide her around the car and sit her in the passenger’s seat, stowing her bag in the back,

before getting back in and driving out of the car-park.

She was thankful that Steve didn't prod her, just letting her stew in silence, letting her get her emotions back in control as they drove towards her house. She was surprised he remembered the route she had drunkenly directed him down after the party. She stalked inside, not even bothering to quiet her footsteps as she hurried through the house – rousing her mother, who just began to call out for her before she made it to the backyard, Steve shadowing her dutifully. After he shut the back door behind them, she screamed – loud and furious, into the woods at the back of the garden. Steve jumped, a hand over his heart.

Charlotte screamed until her throat felt raw, before she dropped like a stone – straight onto the overgrown grass beneath her. She lay there, heaving for breath, eyes fixed on the grey-blue of the sky above her. Crunching let her know that Steve was approaching her cautiously. Without a word, he dropped down beside her, head beside hers. Charlotte didn't take her eyes off the sky. "My band just broke up. With me." Her voice was hoarse. She thought that she should feel embarrassed but she just felt numb.

"Shit." Steve's voice was genuinely taken aback. "What the hell?"

"Yeah." Charlotte said lowly. She laughed humourlessly. "You know – for a moment there – I actually thought I had a way out of here. That maybe I would be able to do what I loved." She couldn't help the way her voice broke as she spoke, fighting more tears. "I thought that maybe... just maybe – the universe could give me this, you know? But I guess fairy tales are full of shit, huh? You just gotta keep working and take the fucking shit you get, time after time." She was rambling, anger rising in her now, "I am so tired. Everyday. I don't sleep – and if I do – I'm seeing that fucking monster, if I'm not sleeping I'm seeing the unpaid bills, I'm seeing my useless mother, I'm seeing my brother not getting the life he deserves. The one thing – the *one* thing I had – the one thing that I could take just a little of for myself... that's fucked off now. I don't have a guitar, I don't have a band. My fucking arm doesn't even work right anymore." Steve's hand found hers somehow, and she turned her head sharply to look at him.

"I'm sorry." He said quietly. She just watched him, willing the tears to stay back. She'd cried enough. "What can I do?"

"Just stay here." It came out rough, and too quickly. But she meant it. She didn't think she could handle being alone right now.

"Okay."

So they lay there, on the grass, the temperature dropping as the sun settled low on the horizon. Steve's hand still covering hers – and it was probably the second weirdest thing that had ever happened to her.

But the peace was shattered as a car honked from the front of the house. Charlotte groaned.

"Billy." She muttered.

Steve frowned deeply, something making his jaw tighten and his eyes darken. "Do you want me to get rid of him?"

She bit her lip. "You'd do that?" She asked softly.

He managed to smile at her. "Of course. It's the least I can do – he's a bastard. Especially after saying all that stuff about you."

"What?" That made her sit up, frowning. "What stuff?"

Steve stilled, sitting up slowly as well, looking nervous. "Y-you mean, you haven't heard?"

Charlotte shook her head. "What. Stuff?" she gritted out.

Steve winced. "He was running his mouth – and I know he was lying, because I was with you, but–"

"What. Did. He. Say?"

It came out in a rush, but Charlotte understood; "hesaidthatyouwereaneasyandthathe wouldgetinyourpant again."

"And you didn't think to tell me?" was all she spared time to say –

before getting to her feet. She could not have found out the truth at a worse time. Now, at least, the whispering at school made sense. *That motherfucker*. Charlotte stormed through the house again, ignoring Steve's calls and her mother's voice and heading straight out the front door.

"BILLY HARGROVE!" She bellowed. The boy was leaning against the hood of his car, smoking – and she'd never hated the smell of smoke more than she did in that instant.

"What's up, butterc–"

He didn't get to finish, because Charlotte had already drawn back her fist and punched him in the face. He stumbled back, dropping the cigarette and the cocky smirk, holding a hand to his cheek and looking simultaneously taken aback and afraid. The fear cleared quickly as he regained his feet, morphing into a deep rage, so violent she took a step back.

"What the *fuck!*" Steve's voice came from her front door, and they both ignored him again.

"What've you been saying, huh? Spreading rumours? I *never* slept with you, Billy – and I sure as hell never will!" she yelled, and his face morphed into understanding, a smirk spreading across his face – making his split lip bleed, though it didn't touch the barely restrained fury in his eyes.

"Ah, come off it, pretty kitty, you should be thankin' me! From what I hear, you're spending a little too much time with the scum at the bottom of the pile. If anything, I'm helping you clear your name."

"I'm not some skank who puts out to a stranger." She spat. "I'm not a fucking conquest, and I don't need you to '*clear my name.*'" she mocked him.

Billy took a step forwards, but Steve was suddenly there, in-between them. Billy's eyes widened in surprise, as if seeing him for the first time. "Oh? So King Steve's still got game?"

"Just get out of here, man." Steve said lowly, shoving at his chest.

Billy absorbed the push, tongue darting out to lick at his bleeding lip.

“Whatever. I don’t want sloppy seconds anyway. I’m surprised you stopped moping over Little Wheeler long enough to get your dick wet this fast, Harrington.” Billy said mockingly. Steve’s face contorted, and then it was Charlotte tugging on his arm – trying to bring him back this time.

“Fuck off, Billy – otherwise you’ll get a knuckle sandwich.” She spat at the boy.

Billy just laughed, malice dancing in his pretty blue eyes. “That was the last time you touch me, whore. You shouldn’t have done that.” Then he swung himself back into his car, and backed out of her driveway – leaving the two of them panting slightly, Charlotte’s hand still on Steve’s arm.

“Did you- did you just quote Grease?” Steve broke the silence, turning to look at her with faint amusement in his eyes, which were, thankfully, warm again.

Charlotte pressed her lips together, adrenaline still running through her, but a smile threatening to spread across her face. “Shut up.” she said weakly, and released his arm to slap at him softly. His eyes followed her hand, and he pursed his lips.

“Come on; let me patch up your hand.” She followed his gaze to her already bruising knuckles.

“Um, yeah. Okay.”

After placating her mother, and making sure Steve didn’t make a sound whilst she gave her mother her dinner and medication – Charlotte found herself in her own bathroom, sitting on the cold sink with Steve in between her legs. It was intimate enough that she was fighting a blush as he worked some cream into her skin, muttering about proper first aid techniques.

She felt weirdly soft, and embarrassingly gooey – even though it was just Steve. Just that asshole Harrington.

The weirdo jock she'd known since grade school – before he'd grown his hair out, and when he'd had a buzzcut and braces. Yeah, Steve Harrington's perfect smile wasn't genetics.

She reasoned it was the fact that someone was reciting the three variations on bandage wrapping as they held her hand between hers. She reasoned it was the fact that she felt tired, and her house was warm, and someone seemed to care.

“-sure you clean- hey are you listening?”

She blinked rapidly, refocusing on his vaguely irritated eyes. He had one hand on his hip, like he was lecturing her, and she stifled a grin at his serious look. “Sorry.” She apologized quickly, and he nodded, apparently satisfied, and launched back into his explanation. He didn't let go of her hand.

“So, I just realized we never talked about you tonight.” Charlotte said as she opened the door for him. He looked startled at her words, before he shook his head, smiling.

“Not everything needs to be about me.” He looked at her, almost bashful. “I liked hanging out with you today. It was a nice...”

“Distraction?” Charlotte offered, knowing it was true.

He swallowed, and his eyes tightened for a second. “I was gonna say it was nice entertainment watching you beat up Billy.” She laughed softly, and he smiled at her. Then he sobered, taking on a stern look. “And seriously, take care of your hand. And if he says anything-”

“I'll be fine, Steve. I can take care of myself just fine. I've been doing it for years.” She said gently, but firmly.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Just because you can, doesn’t mean you have to all the time.” She didn’t have a response. He smiled then. “I’ll pick you up for school then?”

“Uh-” Charlotte didn’t know what Jonathan’s plans were. She didn’t even know where he or Nancy were exactly, and it made a faint spot of anxiety knot itself in her stomach. *One more thing to worry about.* She thought sourly.

“Cool!” he said, brightly – apparently done waiting for a response. Charlotte wondered if Nancy had felt smothered by the affection he showed, or his constant care, and-

She doused the thought quickly.

She did *not* want to wonder about a relationship with Steve Harrington. No sir.

“Bye, Lottie.” He smiled at her from the bottom of the stairs, and she swallowed thickly.

“Night.” She said quickly, and darted inside before she could embarrass herself further. *Stupid.*

5. Cat Meat

“MEWS! Dinner! Come on you little fat-” The front door opened, and Charlie straightened, hiding her bandaged hand behind her back. “Hey Dustin, everything okay?” she took in his anxious expression worriedly.

“Yep. Hi. Yeah, everything’s fine.” Her brother hurried right past her, slamming the door to his room. She could hear him lock it with a click. She frowned.

“Teenagers.” She said with a huff. She looked around again, Mews still nowhere to be seen. *Where was that damn cat?* It wasn’t with her mother, fast asleep in her bedroom, her snores inaudible through her bedroom door that Charlotte kept firmly closed. *Please don’t be lost...*

That would mean a whole world of trouble. Whilst she didn’t exactly like cats – it kept her mother entertained for the most part, and meant that Charlotte actually had some free time once in a while. *Maybe he was asleep in Dustin’s room.* He had been known to wander in there occasionally – despite the constant chaos her brother seemed to like to cultivate in there. *Yeah. That was it.* Hopefully Dustin would let it out to eat later.

Charlotte needed to start making dinner for the two of them anyway.

The next morning dawned bright and clear – with no signs of the cat *anywhere*.

“*Dustin. Dusty! Dustin!*”

Dustin continued loudly talking on the phone as if he couldn’t hear her hissing voice from where she stood, right next to him. Their mother’s eyes were on them from across the kitchen – but Charlotte just narrowed her eyes at Dustin. “Dustin. I can *literally* see that you’re not actually talking to anyone. The dial tone light is on.” Dustin’s eyes flashed to hers warningly, and turning his back further

on their mother – raised a finger to his lips in a hushing motion.

Their mother was frantic. It was enough to make Charlotte want to laugh bitterly, hysterically, at the fact that their mother seemed to care more about a fucking cat than them. It was the most concern she'd seen her mother employ in years. In fact, she'd even been out of the house looking for the cat. She was panting from her exertions – but Charlotte was just surprised to see the amount of energy she was willing to exert.

“Dustin!” Their mother called.

“-Okay, thank you, you are a lifesaver. Okay – bye, bye now. Thank you. Bye.” He thrust the phone back into the cradle, and whirled to face her, Charlotte jumping slightly at his abrupt movement. The siblings exchanged a look before Dustin looked to their mother, a smile growing on his face. Charlotte felt a stab of pity for the desperate way their mother was cradling Mew's cat toy. It was pity, interspersed with an envy that made her embarrassed. She was jealous of a fucking *cat*.

“Alright. Great news!” Dustin began, and she twitched, face lighting up.

“They found her?”

“No. But they saw her wandering around Loch Nora.” Dustin's tone was so convincing that Charlotte narrowed her eyes. *What was he up to?*

“How did the poor baby get all the way out there?” She was crying now, in some strange mixture of joy and fear, and Charlotte felt her face scrunch up in faint disgust. *Imagine loving an animal this much.*

“I don't know!” Dustin accepted his mother's grasp with two hands on hers. “Lost, I guess. But they're gonna look for her. And Charlotte and I will stay here in case they call again, and you're gonna help look – yeah? Yeah?” he was pushing her slightly, towards the door, nodding exaggeratedly with her. Charlotte raised an eyebrow now. *When had her little brother gotten this good at wrangling their mother?*

Dustin extracted himself from her teary embrace with a grimace, and kept shepherding her towards the front door, exchanging garbled words with the woman as Charlotte watched on, entirely bemused. Dustin shut the door behind her, and leaned heavily on it, closing his eyes – his face taking on a world-weary long suffering expression that Charlotte knew he had adopted from *her*.

“Okay. What is going *on*?” she asked, hands flying to her hips automatically. Dustin’s eyes opened and regarded her with a slightly sheepish expression.

“Okay- so you have to promise not to get mad. And in my defence, I didn’t think he would turn into a carnivorous cat-murderer.”

Charlotte’s mouth

“*He*? Cat mur-What-? Dustin, what the f-” He cut her off, grabbing her arm and dragging her roughly out of the living room towards the backyard, beginning his insane explanation of how he had ended up with a baby monster from the Upside Down.

“Find protective gear.” Charlotte said hurriedly, pushing aside the food in their fridge, looking for meat. “Will bologna work?” she asked her brother, holding up the container. He shrugged, already half out of the room.

“Well, considering I’ve only seen him eating nougat and cat – I wouldn’t know.”

Charlotte groaned, but pocketed the sandwich meat anyway. From the other room, she heard her brother muttering to himself as he noisily put on the hockey gear they had. Moving quickly, she laid out a trail of meat, Dustin right behind her, dictating her placement. She was keeping her irritation to a low simmer. She had thought that last year’s incident would be enough to teach him to stop keeping secrets from her. Clearly she wasn’t involved in her brother’s life as much as she thought.

As instructed, she waited by the backdoor for her brother.

“Alright, Dart. Breakfast time!” she heard his voice call, and rolled her eyes. *Dart? What the hell kind of name was Dart?* His hurried footsteps and mutters of “*ohmygodohmygodohmygod!*” were enough to warn her of his approach, and so she opened the back door quickly, stepping aside. But when he started swearing; “*Shitshitshitshitshit!*” she scowled.

“Language!” she snapped, grabbing his wrist and hurrying him towards the shed.

“Lecture me later!” Dustin snipped back, shaking his head rapidly. “Oh my god, we’re gonna die! Shitshitshitshitshit! We’re gonna die!”

Charlotte rolled her eyes and shoved him into the dark and dusty shed, and closed the door quickly behind them. “We *are* not going to die. Not if I have anything to do with it.” Her scars were tingling, but she had a hold of their longest kitchen knife, and though adrenaline was making her heart pound, she felt steady. She felt... strong.

Perhaps it was the daylight, perhaps it was because she had her brother behind her, her own body between him and the creature – or perhaps it was because, maybe... just maybe... she wasn’t as terrified as she used to be. Because now at least she could see the nightmare approaching her.

She pressed her face against the slats, peering out into the yard. “Come on fucker...” Dustin sucked in a scandalised gasp at her language, but she ignored him. “Come on, eat... come *on*.”

Then, it appeared in the doorway, and she narrowed her eyes at it, breathing stuttering slightly. It wasn’t too big – not as imposing as the monster that had ruined her arm, but it was still creepy, flower-face shut as it slurped up the meat. It reminded her of a weird lizard-dog.

“What is it doing?” Dustin hissed trying to stick his face up to the gaps too – Charlotte shoving him away with a hand on his helmet.

“Stay back.” she grumbled, turning to push him more forcefully as he

tried to look again. A low wet sounding growl came from outside the shed, and the siblings froze. Charlotte turned slowly, freezing at the sight of the thing's face pointed directly at them. Dustin gave a little squeal, and Charlotte grabbed his hockey stick from him quickly, passing him the knife slowly and lifting a warning finger to her lips. Dustin nodded, and melted back into the wall of the shed, eyes wide with terror. Charlotte grit her teeth, and turned back to the door, just catching sight of it walking towards the shed. It was chittering to itself, low and slimy, and Charlotte closed her eyes for a second, tightening her grip on the hockey stick. Dustin caught her eyes, and something in her gaze must have startled him because he shook his head wildly, mouthing 'NO!' desperately.

Charlotte readied herself, ignoring the tremor of her fingers.

Then, before her nerve failed her, she kicked open the door and ran at the creature – screaming at the top of her lungs. It screeched, clearly startled, and scrambled over itself as it tried to recover from its shock. She didn't give it any time to recover, and swung at it with the hockey stick. It was like the spirit of a hockey-jock possessed her, because her stick connected solidly with its body and sent it flying towards the open cellar doors. Dustin was by her side the next second, both of them scrabbling for purchase on the red metal doors as they slammed it shut – just as the creature jumped up at them.

"I'm sorry!" Dustin yelled as it banged against the doors frantically, squealing through the metal. "You ate my cat."

Charlotte panted, body splayed over the doors – and turned her head to look at her younger brother. Dustin's eyes were still wide, but as they stared at each other, breathing heavily, a small smile broke out on her face.

Dustin slid off the doors, and picked up the chains they were using to hold it shut. When they were shackled tight, Charlotte stood up. The siblings stared at each other for a moment, before they started laughing hysterically.

"Ho-holy shit!" She gasped out, clasping at her sides. "Dustin- what the *hell* man? You cannot, I repeat, *cannot* keep shit like this from me ever, *ever* again!"

Dustin nodded weakly, and stumbled over to wrap his arms around her middle, gesture made awkward by his excessive padding. "I'm sorry. Thanks, Lottie." He said lowly. She patted his head, and tried to catch her breath. Dustin pulled away then, and shot her an accusatory look. "You never told me you were like that!"

"Wh-what? Like what?" Charlotte tilted her head in confusion.

Dustin made a violent gesture with his hands. "You know – all... superhero-y."

"I am not." Charlotte rolled her eyes.

"Yes you are! The way you just went *BAM* with the stick, and that time at the Byers when you fought the Demogorgon, and when you hit that guy with the plank – and I *know* you can shoot a gun, Mike said that Nancy said that you can shoot really well, and-"

"Whoa! Whoa! Okay! Calm down." Charlotte chuckled nervously, and ran a hand through her hair. "I'm not- like, a *hero*, or whatever – I just wanted to...protect you. I guess."

Dustin was quiet as he processed her words. "You're brave." He said finally, decisively. "It's your super-power." Charlotte felt a smile tug at her lips.

"...It doesn't matter how scared you are, it just matters that you face it in the end. That's bravery..."

Hopper's words came back to her, and she ducked her gaze.

"Come on." She tugged at his padding. "We should eat some lunch before we bury the cat and work out how to kill this thing."

Charlotte scrubbed violently at the bloodstain in her brother's room, listening to him plead with nobody over his comm channel. He was right in trying to get help. Charlotte wasn't sure if they'd be able to kill it by themselves – from what Dustin had told her, it learnt quickly – and it would do all it could to avoid her now. It was also

dark in the basement and very easy for it to slip past them.

Hopper was still missing, and the Byer's house phone had rung out. None of Dustin's friends were answering the radio, and Charlotte hadn't wanted to risk outing Nancy and Jonathan's escapades by calling and asking Mrs. Byers where they were – and even after Dustin had forced her to call anyway, the line had been busy. They were... alone.

She bit her lip, ignoring the strain in her arm as she scrubbed harder, trying to think of a solution. They couldn't leave it down there forever, and who knew how long it would be until someone could come help them.

"Lottie!" She looked up, Dustin panting in the doorway. "I'm gonna go to Mike's house, okay?"

"Wait what?" She sat up, throwing down the scrubbing brush. "What about-"

"You've gotta stay on guard duty till I get back, okay?" Dustin's voice brokered no room for argument, and Charlotte just nodded dumbly. "You'd better finish cleaning that, though. You missed a spot." He said cheekily. Charlotte's jaw dropped in outrage, but her brother had already turned and left, and she heard the door slam after him loudly.

Now it was just her, the bloodstains on the carpet, and the silent house. *And the monster in the cellar.*

The sound of a car pulling up made Charlotte sit up straight from where she had been sitting on the back porch, one hand on the hockey stick, and one eye on the cellar doors.

Was her mother home already?

The sound of voices – both male – made her stand, clutching at the stick, and eyes narrowing at the back door. *Or was it men from the lab?* The door banged open noisily, revealing her brother and-

Steve Harrington.

"Listen, I'll take a look – it should be fine- oh." Steve stopped speaking abruptly as their eyes met. As memory of her breakdown the night before surfaced, she flushed, thankful for the dark evening hiding it from him.

Dustin snorted – breaking the silence. "Right. This has been sufficiently awkward. Can we go kill the monster now?" he promptly stomped down the steps towards the cellar.

Steve blinked rapidly, eyes molten amber in the gold light of the porch, and Charlotte coughed. "Hey. Um. Not to be rude but, what are you doing here?"

Steve shrugged, a hint of humour in the action – though his eyes were serious. "Apparently I'm supposed to be helping you kill a monster-lizard-dog from an alternate dimension?"

Charlotte couldn't help the smile that crossed her face. "Right. Of course. We should get on that."

There was something comforting about having Steve there, something familiar in the way he positioned himself slightly between her and the metal doors. Almost déjà vu – apart from the fact she wasn't bleeding out over her best friend's living room carpet. *No*. this time she was more prepared, and Steve was by her side from the get-go.

He leant over the doors, exchanging a confused look with her. "I don't hear shit." He said succinctly, raising an eyebrow.

"It is in there. I put it down there myself." Charlotte said, and Steve pursed his lips. Warily, he jabbed at the door with his bat, clanging on the metal. When there was no response, he tilted his head slightly, considering, swiping a tongue over his bottom lip distractingly. Without warning, he swung down on the doors again, causing a louder thud that resounded – and making her start slightly.

"Sorry." He muttered, shooting her an apologetic look. Charlotte just shook her head – some weird, hidden part of her curling up in

pleasure. He turned to Dustin, shining his flashlight at his face. "Look, kid, if this is a weird Halloween prank you roped your sister into – you're dead." Charlotte scowled at him, and he winced. "Metaphorically dead."

"It's not! I swear! Now get out of my face." Dustin said. Steve sighed, and raised his gaze skywards.

Charlotte cleared her throat. "Please. We can't do this alone." She said, almost inaudibly, but Steve's eyes met hers, and he stared at her again – seemingly looking for something.

Then he turned to Dustin. "You got a key for this thing?"

Dustin scrambled to get the chains off, Steve squatting to throw the doors open – unafraid – despite Charlotte's warning hand hovering over his shoulder. Steve grabbed at the torch, shining it down the stairs – and Charlotte frowned at the distinct lack of snarling monster.

"He must be further down there." Dustin said unhelpfully, "I'll stay up here, in case he tries to escape." and Steve turned to fix him with a baleful look, shaking his head.

"Whatever. Lottie, you stay there." He stood, and hefted the bat. Dustin frowned, looking at Steve with a sudden suspicion.

"Uh, no. This is a two person job, Harrington." Charlotte put a hand on her hip, trying to look a little taller than she was. At Steve's unimpressed snort – she guessed she had failed.

"Yeah. Exactly. Stay up here and make sure it doesn't get out. Wonder Boy's not filling me with confidence." Ignoring Dustin's gasp of outrage, Steve started descending the steps – not allowing Charlotte to argue.

Charlotte worried at her bottom lip with her teeth, watching Steve's flashlight disappear into the darkness anxiously. After a few minutes,

she leant forwards. “Harrington?” she called softly into the cellar.

Dustin squeaked slightly. “What if he’s already dead?” he whispered loudly. Charlotte shot him a killing look. “Sorry, sorry. You’re right, we would have heard screams. Uh. Steve?” he called, slightly louder, dodging Charlotte’s swipe at him. “What’s going on down there?”

A flashlight shone straight up at them with no warning, making them both jump back. Steve’s face appeared, looking deadly serious. “Get down here.”

Dustin and Charlotte exchanged wary looks, Dustin falling behind Charlotte as she descended the stairs slowly. Steve was standing in the middle of the cellar, bat held aloft – something slimy and leathery dangling and dripping from the end. Charlotte swallowed thickly at the realisation it was the skin of the thing.

“Oh, shit.” Dustin swore, but Charlotte didn’t have the energy to reprimand him, eyes moving past the gross shed skin, and focussing on the hole in the wall. The bricks had been torn away, the naked earth and roots exposed, a dark tunnel dug out away from the cellar. A pit formed in her stomach, fear filling her, along with guilt. *She should have stopped it.*

She put a hand delicately over her mouth as Steve and Dustin crouched in front of the hole, Dustin murmuring in disbelief.

6. Going Home

Charlotte puttered around the kitchen uselessly, letting Dustin and Steve's voices wash over her as she fixed up mugs of cocoa – as per Dustin's request. Her eyes drifted to the clock – and she startled.

It was already 10:00.

"Where is she?" she frowned, catching Dustin's attention. Dustin's eyes flickered to the clock as well, and he grimaced.

"I don't know – she probably stopped at Marge's house for the night." Dustin said helpfully, sending her a comforting look. "She'll be okay."

"She'll be in the middle of withdrawals – unless she remembered to take her medicine with her." Charlotte muttered, slamming the cocoa powder down on the bench with more force than necessary.

"Lottie – she'll be okay. For one day. She's an adult – Jesus, you should just relax for one night." Dustin rolled his eyes. Actually rolled his eyes at *her*. She stilled, and Dustin gulped – recognising his mistake.

Charlotte breathed out shakily, very aware of Steve's confused eyes on them. "Dustin. I have spent the last eight and a half years unable to take a *fucking* breath without relaxing. I *cannot* relax about this." She said calmly, through gritted teeth. "I spend every waking minute trying to ignore the pressing responsibility of running this house. We have so many overdue bills I can't pay, so many things I need to do but I can't because I have to worry about her, and because I need to care for you. I don't ask you for much – but please. Respect that I *try* and-" Her voice cracked and she stopped speaking, snapping her mouth shut. She closed her eyes for a second, glancing down at her white knuckled grip on the benchtop.

Dustin was looking at her, guilt and shame and remorse building in his eyes – but it was the faint embarrassed glance he sent at Steve that tipped her over the edge. Steve was still sitting there, eyes wide. Charlotte couldn't look at him, couldn't bare to see the pity, the awkwardness on his face – his open eyes always too easy for her

read.

Instead, she turned sharply and left the kitchen, heading for her bedroom. She shut the door softly behind her, and sank onto her bed, burying her face in her pillow. Alone in the dark, she let herself cry quietly into the fabric of her pillowcase.

She should have learnt by now – *keep the weakness inside.*

She didn't know how much later it was – the sliver of night sky visible through her curtains giving no indication to the passing of time – when the door to her room opened quietly. She kept still, hoping that Dustin would think she was asleep and leave-

“Dustin's in bed.”

Steve's voice was unexpected enough that she opened her eyes to stare at him. He was in shadow, silhouetted in the dim light from the hallway. “Charlotte – why didn't you tell me what's been going on?” his voice was slightly reproachful, and she sat up, giving up any pretence of sleeping, irritation rising in her.

“Why didn't I tell you? Oh, I don't know – maybe I didn't want the whole school knowing that the Henderson family is dirt poor and barely staying afloat? Maybe I didn't want you to look at me like I'm just some pitiful, hopeless dreamer.”

She was glaring at him, and as her voice rose, he shut the door and leant against it, face illuminated by the sliver of moonlight coming through her curtains. He was looking sad, but though she looked – she couldn't see the pity she so despised.

“I would never pity you, Charlotte Henderson. You're too strong for pity.” He said seriously.

She laughed humourlessly, “it's funny, people keep saying that – but I feel so *fucking weak.*” She took a hiccupping breath, and pressed her

fingers into her eyes, willing the tears to stay back. She heard him approach, felt her mattress dip as he sat next to her. His fingers wrapped around her wrists, touch burning hot – and gently tugged them away from her face.

“I don’t pity you, Charlotte. I want to help you – sure – but never for a second do I pity you.” He repeatedly lowly, but she closed her eyes at the force of his words anyway.

“And what exactly could you do?” she asked him, sarcastically, but with real question shining through, colouring her words desperate.

“If you’d take it, I’d give you money-” before she could process, he held up a hand. “But how about I help out here some nights. That way maybe you can pick up some shifts somewhere?” he suggested reasonably.

Charlotte shook her head, smiling sardonically. “You don’t know how much effort it is – my mother, she is demanding, and she is ritualistic, and she is a nightmare. And Dustin-”

“Dustin and I get on great!” he said brightly, unconvincingly. Somehow sensing her disbelieving stare in the dark, he amended his statement. “We could. He’s a cool dude. Way too sassy – but cool.” At her silence, he rubbed his thumbs along her wrist bone. “I could learn, Lottie. I could help. If you let me.”

Charlotte swallowed thickly. “*Why?*” she asked softly. He was silent, but she could feel his eyes on her.

“Because...” He began, his tone strangely reminiscent. “Because, *even though you don’t believe it. I care.*” He echoed her words from the moonlit talk after Tina’s with as much sincerity as she had said them. She sucked in a sharp breath, loud in the hush between them. They sat in silence for a long while, his hands having somehow shifted to holding hers. She could feel the roughness of the self-inflicted scar on her palm against his, and wondered if it bothered him.

“Are you going home?” she whispered finally.

“Do you want me to go?” he asked, just as quietly. At her muteness,

he sighed, and stood dropping her hands. Panic seized her suddenly and violently, and she grasped at him.

“Stay.”

He paused, and then, without a word – toed his sneakers off, and unzipped his bomber. She let go of his hand, and took off her own sweater, leaving her in her thin undershirt and her jeans. She scooted back, pressing her back against the wall on one side of her bed. The mattress sunk slightly again as he settled down beside her, laying facing her. She couldn’t see his face, only the barest glint of his eyes reflecting the moonlight.

Her heart was pounding out of her chest, something soft and warm settling in her stomach as his hand found hers again. She let him hold it, and closed her eyes, calming to the steady sound of his breathing.

The night continued on outside, but Charlotte slept warmly – peacefully – for the first time in a long while.

She woke up to the smell of something burning and sat up quickly – body reacting before she was fully awake. It was only after she attempted to jump out of bed and tumbled to the floor as she got caught by a warm body just stirring beside her – did she remember what had happened. As she processed the way Steve’s hair apparently looked extra soft in the morning and fell over his eyes slightly.

“Are you alright?”

And apparently his voice did this nice deep grumbly thing that made her stomach flip. She scrambled to her feet, and darted for a sweatshirt, anything to turn her face away from him.

“Hah. Yeah. Fine. Do you smell smoke? Cause I smell smoke- I should, um-” She was out the door the next second, just in time for the smoke detector to go off in the kitchen.

She hurried into the kitchen to see Dustin frantically dumping the smoking contents of a pan in the sink – the running water hissing and spattering loudly. She coughed – smoke was thick in the air, making the sunlight streaming in through the window thick, visible beams. “Jesus! Dustin! Stop!” She took the pan from him – only giving a cursory glance to the charcoal black remains of whatever used to be food. She threw it straight in the garbage, and ran the water hot. “Go open the windows and the back door.” She ordered over the loud beeping of the alarm, and Dustin scrambled to do it.

Steve emerged then, and she fought a sigh at the way Dustin’s eyes narrowed in suspicion at Steve’s sleep mussed state. Steve just chuckled, and picked up a towel and went to stand under the alarm, waving the towel to disperse the smoke. Charlotte put the slightly cooler pan under the hot water, squirting in a healthy amount of dish soap, and stepping back to let it soak, putting her hands on her hips. The alarm shut off abruptly, but the smell of smoke was still thick, and Charlotte wrinkled her nose.

Dustin smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I wanted to help with breakfast.”

Charlotte couldn’t hold the stern look for very long, a fond smile growing across her face as she ruffled her brother’s hair. “You’re a nightmare. Thanks for trying.”

Dustin grinned up at her – but then winced. “I think that was all of our eggs, though.” Charlotte worried at her bottom lip, and crossed to the fridge, taking in the empty state. Her eyes slid to the grocery money jar on top of the fridge, and tried to mentally calculate how much it would effect next week’s grocery budget if they went out for breakfast now-

“Hey, why don’t we stop by the diners for breakfast?” Steve suggested suddenly. “We gotta pick up some meat at the butchers anyway – right?” Catching Charlotte’s worried look, he cleared his throat. “My treat.” She looked at him sharply, but he was already looking away – to Dustin. “Go get changed, kid. You smell like a forest-fire.” Dustin saluted him, making Steve start in surprise, and ran from the room.

Charlotte narrowed her eyes at him. “You don’t have to do that.”

Steve shrugged. "I'd rather not eat charcoal for breakfast." He turned and left the room, but then popped his head back in. "Hey – just out of curiosity, does your mother own any Farrah Fawcett products?"

Charlotte smiled bemusedly, taken aback. "Um – I think so, why?"

"Just wondering." He smiled, and disappeared again.

Charlotte laughed quietly, alone in her smoky kitchen. *When had her life gotten so strange?*

Breakfast was easy – enjoyable, Steve equal parts annoyed and amused and confused at Dustin's non-stop chatter. Apparently, Dustin had decided he could trust Steve now – and they were close enough for Dustin's inner monologue to make an appearance in conversation, like it usually did. Midway through a detailed and dumbed down explanation of a sensory deprivation tank, Steve had looked up and met Charlotte's eyes. It had taken her a second too long to re-school her features from the soft smile she had been directing at the pair of them, back into a neutral one – and he had grinned widely at her as she buried her face in her coffee, feeling irrationally flustered. Somehow his hair had regained its usual pomp and he was disarmingly Steve Harrington again – no evidence of the soft-spoken boy that had held her hands in his outer appearance. Though when he laughed at her brother's joke, and slid a pancake onto his plate, she saw him again.

Even the drive back to the forest, armed with task they were going to have to perform – and several pounds of chopped meat – didn't detract from the tranquil, warm state she was in.

Steve pulled up on a side road beside the edge of the forest, and turned to look at Dustin. "Is here okay, man?"

Dustin pursed his lips, and looked carefully out the window. "This should be fine. We just need to find the old railway line." Charlotte

had no idea what he was talking about – but she nodded anyway, looking to Steve expectantly.

Steve shrugged. “Okay. Let’s get to work then.”

It was when Dustin’s voice suddenly interrupted their work, radio crackling faintly, did she realise what exactly she was walking into again. “Well, well, well. Look who it is.” Her younger brother turned away from the car, planting his hands on his hips, in a subconscious mimic of her own behaviour. “Well, when you were having sister problems, Dart grew again, he escaped, and I’m pretty sure he’s a baby Demogorgon.”

Charlotte snorted. “*Pretty sure?*” Dustin turned to roll his eyes at her, before refocusing on his conversation.

“I’ll explain later – just meet me, Charlotte and Steve at the junkyard.”

Charlotte’s memory unhelpfully supplied her of the image of the junkyard – and the bloodied face of the man she had dropped with a plank of wood. Hopper hadn’t said anything, but he had given a little nod and the faintest suggestion of a proud smile. Why a police chief would be *proud* of her for hitting a man and knocking him unconscious – she had no idea. But at least he hadn’t arrested her.

Steve nudged her with the hockey stick, and she took it wordlessly, hand straying to the pistol in her waistband. Steve watched her movement, and she smiled nervously – hastily turning to walk towards the tree line. “All right. Let’s go.” Steve said loudly – trying to get Dustin’s attention. As she breached the tree line, an uncomfortable sense of *déjà vu* making her skin crawl. At least it wasn’t dark yet. *She missed Jonathan something awful.*

Charlotte had avoided the forest as much as she could – asking Jonathan to take roads that didn’t go near the trees. He, at least, had understood. He hadn’t asked her about it either – because she knew that the forest still featured in some of his nightmares as well. *Stumbling in the dark, trying to find Nancy, stalked by a monster...*

She shuddered slightly, very aware of the closeness of the tree trunks

– the way the canopy made it a little darker on the forest floor. She suddenly felt very small and very exposed, and hurried towards the ridge that looked like it could lead to the abandoned train tracks.

7. Fire Hot Feelings

Steve kept his eyes on Charlotte's back. It was obvious something was bothering her – her shoulders were all hunched, and she was twitchy. Well. Twitchier than normal.

Steve knew she flinched at loud noises, hated the dark, recoiled from fast movement.

He had to fight the same reactions himself.

At least here he could keep an eye on her better.

He felt guilty. Deeply and terribly guilty – and every time he saw the angry red scars on her arm, the haunted look in her eyes, or the occasional panic that turned quickly into relief when she saw his face – he tasted it, bitter in the back of his throat. It had taken almost losing her for him to realize that he valued her as a person, as a friend.

Hell – he still remembered when she had kicked a sixth grader in the shin for making fun of his braces when they were only in third grade. She had been angry back then, he remembered. Her father had just left their family, he still remembered the principal and her mother taking her out of class to tell her, the way she had returned with red eyes and tear tracks still on her chubby cheeks. It was only when they had moved up into fifth or sixth grade that she swallowed that anger.

Sixth or seventh grade was probably when she had started to take care of her family – because it was around then that she stopped talking as much to him, when she stopped going to parties, her mother stopped coming to PTAs, stopped bringing in treats for bake sales. It was when she started bringing her younger brother everywhere with her.

Freshman year was when she had truly changed. She had lost all of her baby-fat over that summer, and she looked exhausted, but back then – if you were skinny, and a little pretty, you had enough for popularity. And Steve remembers smiling at her widely – both to show her that he had gotten his braces off, and to try and coax her

over to him.

But she had only given a half-hearted smile, and then had moved towards a pair of boys – one with long, unkempt blonde hair, and the other a skinny Latin American student, and they had slipped off in the direction of the music rooms.

And that was that.

Steve had always tried to make sure that she would be accepted into the popular group he had been a part of – not wanting to make her life any more difficult. He would take the others to the Hideaway, make them listen to the music, until it became something cool to do for the rest of the school's population. And it *was* cool. *She* was cool – and he'd been happy just to have her around, even if she seemed to hate him with a *passion*, for some reason.

Looking back now – it was pretty obvious why.

He'd been a complete asshole.

And he'd said some horrible things. He didn't even know why – he had just panicked at the sight of her turning her back on him, as she walked away from him, after that blow-up at him and Tommy and Carol behind the cinema; something inside him had known that it was probably the final one. They'd had spats before, sure, the others took it in their stride. They needed her and she needed them – she always came back – but she'd been getting closer to Jonathan, and for the first time, Steve had thought that that would be it. All over. No more Henderson and Harrington. So maybe he'd just tried to scare her, tried to make her realize she was choosing social suicide over... over *him*.

Some sick part of him was relieved that they had been able to make it up – at the expense of her arm, and her music, and her friends.

Steve swallowed tightly.

It didn't matter. Because he wouldn't let it happen again. He owed her that much.

Dustin coughed. "Are you gonna help, or what?"

Steve startled, eyes jumping from the back of her blonde hair – the roots were just starting to show – to the arched eyebrow of her younger brother. He shot Dustin a superior look, and threw a handful of meat down. “So let me get this straight.” He changed the subject instead, “You kept something you knew was probably dangerous, in order to impress a girl who... who you just met?”

Dustin made a squawking sound, turning his head away huffily. “Alright, that’s *grossly* over simplifying things.”

Steve was genuinely confused. “I mean, why would a girl like some nasty slug, anyway?”

“An inter-dimensional slug? Because its awesome.” Dustin said, in a ‘no-duh’ tone.

“Well, even if she thought it was cool – which she didn’t – I, I just, I don’t know I feel like you’re trying way too hard, man.” Steve said, eyes straying to Charlotte’s back again. She hadn’t responded to the conversation, but he could see that her shoulders had loosened slightly, her grip on the hockey stick a little laxer.

“Well, not everyone can have your perfect hair, alright?” Dustin said defensively, but there was something in the drop of his shoulders that made Steve pick up his pace so that he was walking right beside the younger boy.

“It’s not about the hair, man.” Steve said. “It’s... it’s about – you know – the key with girls is acting just, just like you don’t care.” He winced, even as he said it, but Dustin had turned to look at him with a hopeful expression.

“Even if you do?”

“Yeah, exactly. It drives them nuts.” Steve shrugged nonchalantly.

“Then what?” Dustin probed, in the same insistent way he had formed their plan to capture Dart. Steve had to give it to the kid. He was smart. Maybe not in a normal way – but his brain was thorough, and if he wanted to know something, then he wouldn’t stop until he knew. He was stubborn too – like his sister.

"You just wait, until, ah..." he threw some more meat on the ground.
"Until you feel it."

"Feel what?" Dustin asked quietly.

Steve's mind ticked over to Nancy, unbidden – as they usually did, about the overwhelming feelings he used to have- *no, had-* for her. "It's like, before it's gonna storm, you know. You can't see it, but you can feel it, like this, uh... electricity you know?" *A dark room, her hands in his, she always had warm skin. He could feel the faint scar across her palm from that night, and he could smell her warm honey scent, mixed with the edge of cigarette smoke. Familiar. Always familiar.* "Or like, it creeps up on you, like this fire-hot feeling." His mouth continued without his bidding. His eyes widened at himself, and he shook his head slightly – feeling his cheeks heat.

"Oh, like in the electromagnetic field, when the clouds in the atmosphere-" Dustin began, and Steve pounced on the mental distraction. *What the hell was wrong with him? this was her younger brother.*

"No, no, no, no, no – like a sexual electricity." He said hurriedly.

"Oh." Dustin said faintly.

"You feel that, and then you make your move." Steve said, pointing at him.

"So that's when you kiss her?"

Steve blanched at the thought of thirteen-year-olds kissing. "No! Whoa, whoa! Slow down, Romeo."

Dustin apologized quietly. "Sorry."

"Sure, okay, some girls, yeah – they want you to be aggressive." He half-smiled, "you know, strong, hot, and heavy, like a... like a, I don't know, a lion." Dustin hummed in understanding, "but others, you gotta be slow, you gotta be stealthy, like, ah, a ninja."

"What type is Nancy?" Dustin asked innocently. Steve felt the familiar frustration rise in him.

"Nancy. Nancy is different. She's different to the other girls." He said hurriedly, torn between anger at their parting, and the loyalty he felt, the echo of his love for her. *Jesus*, he loved her.

"And what about my sister?"

Steve choked on nothing, and rounded wide-eyed on Dustin. "Wh-what? Charlotte?"

Dustin nodded, raising an eyebrow. "I know you *slept* together last night." He said challengingly.

Steve coughed, and shot a look at Charlotte, who was still walking ahead of them. "Nothing- I mean, it wasn't *like that*." He hissed, and Dustin looked a mixture between suspicious and amused. "She's not-she's *nothing*. That's it. I *love* Nancy. There's nothing between Charlotte and I." he said. Dustin narrowed his eyes, and held Steve's gaze for another beat. Steve felt unnamed panic rising in him.

"Okay. Whatever you say." He said finally, and turned away. Steve breathed a sigh of relief, and hastened his step to catch up with the boy again.

Charlotte could hear the two of them approach her, and quickly moved to the side so that Dustin was between her and Steve.

She was...

Angry was the wrong word.

She had heard them. How could she not? They were alone in a forest, how could she not have *heard him say that she was nothing*?

It stung. Badly.

She thought that maybe they'd moved past this. They were friends now – *weren't they*? Obviously not. Last night she had felt safe in the

first time in a long while – and whilst it was embarrassing and shameful that it was because of her friend's *ex-boyfriend*, 'King Steve,' the royal asshole himself – it was *him*. It had been him since he had saved her life at Jonathan's.

She couldn't help it – when she woke up from a nightmare, she had to make herself remember that she *had* survived, that they'd all lived, because *Steve* had come. When she felt panicked in a crowd, and no one else seemed to get it, when school was overwhelming – all she had to do was find him, because now, to her, *he* was safety.

She could feel his curious stare on the side of her face, and ignored him. Instead she turned to Dustin, and offered him a comforting smile. "This will do." She said, and as Steve moved to speak, she started moving. "This will do fine."

As the boys dumped the remainder of the meat on the ground, Charlotte perched on top of the bonnet of a broken down car – making mental notes about the semantics of their shelter and what they would need for it – a voice came from a top the hill.

"I said medium well!"

She recognized Lucas' form, and gave him a wave – stopping short at the sight of a red-headed girl beside him. From her brother's description, this could only be Max – sister of one Billy Hargrove. She grimaced, turning to see Dustin in a state of panic. Then Steve's hand settled on his shoulder, and he lent down, muttering something to him. Dustin's face grew slightly determined and he nodded, smiling slightly up at Steve. Charlotte felt her heart seize at the gesture – before she remembered her grief with Steve. Face hardening, she jumped off the hood of the car and made her way over to Lucas.

"Hey, Lucas." She smiled welcomingly at him, "And you must be Max, right?" she said to the girl. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she was looking at Charlotte with a blank expression.

“Yeah. Hi.” She said lowly. Charlotte almost raised an eyebrow, but resisted. With a brother as aggressive as Billy – it was no wonder the girl was a little guarded.

“I’m Charlotte. I’m Dustin’s sister.”

“Oh.” Max’s voice was slightly surprised, and she dropped her defensive stance. “You’re *Charlotte*.” Charlotte shot Lucas a suspicious look, and he just gave a sheepish smile, “Is it true. What you did?”

Lucas swallowed as Charlotte frowned confusedly. “I may or may not have told her... everything.”

Charlotte sighed. “You’d better go talk to Dustin.” Lucas nodded, face set as he headed for Dustin, grabbing him by the wrist and tugging him over behind the car she had been standing on. Charlotte turned back to Max, who was watching her with equal parts curiosity and animosity. “Would you mind giving me a hand? I need help to set up all this scrap metal – and those two are about as weak as a pair of three-year-olds.”

Max’s face twitched, like she was trying not to smile – and she nodded.

“Hey! Dickheads! How come the only ones helping me are Charlotte and this random girl?”

Charlotte fought a grin at Steve’s yell, instead, turning it into an eye roll. Max caught her. “Is he your boyfriend?” she asked quietly.

Charlotte shook her head, smiling bitterly. “No. He’s my best friend’s ex, actually. Why?”

Max hummed thoughtfully. “Oh. I just thought he liked you, that’s all.”

Charlotte blanched. “*Liked* me?”

Max shrugged. "He just keeps looking at you. And he keeps giving you the lightest stuff to carry."

"Asshole." Charlotte muttered, shooting a scathing look at Steve's back as he lifted a sheet of metal on top of the bus. "I can handle it."

Max laughed quietly, almost knowingly. "I figured you guys were fighting."

Charlotte grumbled. "Yeah well, considering we're not even friends – there's nothing we could really fight about." Max just hummed again, and helped her shift a heavy tire into place.

As the light started to fade, they climbed into the bus – the golden light turning them shades of warm orange. She ignored the way Steve waited for her to get on, taking a minute to scan their surroundings. They'd done a good job of insulating the bus – and hopefully the kids should be safe. They'd pretty much killed one Demogorgon with fire, and because Dart was a lot smaller – hopefully this time it would do the job.

"Lottie." She tensed at his call. "Lottie. Charlotte, come on, why are you ignoring me?" she turned back to face him, shooting him a cold look before she stalked into the bus – brushing roughly past him. She heard him sigh deeply before he slammed the door shut.

There was a heavy mist rolling in over the junkyard, making it about a thousand times more creepy than it needed to be. Charlotte scowled fruitlessly at the white fog, and moved away from the small crack she had been peering out of. It was cold in the bus. She shivered slightly, closing her eyes against the increasing beat of her heart.

She settled back into her seat, focusing on the repetitive clicking from Steve's lighter. It was dumb, to take comfort in him being here – when he so clearly didn't care about her. He had said it himself; it was guilt that was keeping him here – nothing else. He just wanted to ease his conscience.

“So you guys have really fought one of these things before?” Max's sudden question was loud. Charlotte opened her eyes to find Steve looking at her. She turned away from him and towards Max, who was looking between them. She swallowed, and nodded. “And you're 100% sure it wasn't a bear.” She asked, and Charlotte resisted the urge laugh hysterically, hand flying up to rub at her scars under her jacket sleeve. *If only.*

“Shit. Don't be an idiot, okay?” To her surprise, Dustin leapt to her defense – albeit a little harshly. “It wasn't a bear. Why are you even here if you don't believe us?” Max and Steve raised their eyebrows, and Charlotte just looked back out into the mist again. “Just go home.” she winced at his tone, and closed her eyes again.

“Geesh. Someone's cranky. Past your bedtime?” Charlotte listened as Max stood up, and then headed up the creaky ladder they'd installed.

“That's good. Show her that you don't care.”

Steve's voice made her clench her jaw.

“I don't.” Dustin's low voice made her sit up again. Her brother turned away from her questioning gaze, and Charlotte sighed, shifting as the position made the gun in her waistband dig painfully into her hip. “Why are you winking, Steve. Stop.” She could hear a note of amusement in his voice though, and relaxed slightly.

Then a screeching roar split the quiet outside.

She sucked in a startled breath, and shot over to the gap again, straining her eyes. Steve and Dustin crowded around her, pressing in close to look out. She didn't have the energy to push him away – blood running cold as she looked for movement in the silent white ocean outside.

"You see him?" Dustin asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"Lucas? What's going on?" Dustin turned to yell up the ladder.

"*Hold on!*" came the faint reply. "I've got eyes! Ten o'clock! Ten o'clock!"

Steve's hand came up to rest on her shoulder as he leaned closer to look out. He jerked his head towards a dark shape that Charlotte could only just make out in the fog. "There." He muttered. She nodded slowly.

"What's he doing?" Dustin asked nervously.

"I don't know." Steve muttered, squinting at the shape. Straining her ears, Charlotte could only just hear the faintest chittering coming from it. She recognized the sound. He was bigger now. "He's not taking the bait. Why is he not taking the bait?" Steve asked frantically.

"Maybe he's not hungry?" Dustin suggested.

"Or maybe he doesn't wanna eat meat doused in petrol." Charlotte suggested sarcastically.

"Maybe he's sick of cow." Steve's voice was low. Charlotte felt something sink in her stomach, and turned to look at him.

"Harrington-" she began, cold-shoulder be damned.

But he was already standing. Dustin's eyes grew wide. "Steve- Steve no, what are you doing?"

Charlotte got to her feet, and grabbed at his wrist that was about to grab the bat. "I'm coming with you." She said.

He shook his head. "No way. You stay here."

Charlotte felt anger rise in her, and lowered her voice to a hiss, leaning in closer to his face. "If you think I'm staying in *here* whilst

your stupid-ass is out there alone, then maybe you're dumber than I thought. I'm coming with you, Steve Harrington." She untucked her shirt, exposing the gun. Steve's eyes widened.

"O-okay. Yeah. Alright. Just-just stay behind me, alright?" He said, bobbing his head almost comically. Charlotte rolled her eyes, and turned to Dustin.

"Stay here. And get ready." She snatched the lighter from Steve and tossed it to Dustin.

"No wait – Charlotte–"

She peeled off her jacket, and pulled out the gun. The scars on her arm were still vivid, even in the moonlight. Steve's eyes lingered on them, and she pushed past him, opening the bus door and stepping out, Steve shadowing her closely.

He fell into step with her, giving the bar a few practice swings, the end whistling lowly through the air. She clicked her tongue, whistling, as if for a dog. "Come on, boy. Come and get some fresh meat."

Steve shot her an incredulous look and she shrugged slightly, raising the gun – as Dart's growling got louder. It was hard to see anything in the mist, and her hair raised in goose bumps on her arms, every sense hyper alert. Steve mimicked her, coaxing Dart forwards – swinging the bat around his legs, like some sort of macabre pendulum. Then the wind changed, cold air blowing past them, and the mist blew back – exposing Dart.

Charlotte stiffened, and raised the weapon – pointing it at the creature. *He had grown... a lot.* His claws were long and wickedly sharp looking, glinting in the low light of the moon – and Charlotte's arm ached. She breathed in a long breath, and clicked off the safety.

"GUYS! WATCH OUT!"

Lucas' scream make them both startle, Steve not taking his eyes off Dart, as it took a step towards them. "A little busy here!"

But Charlotte whirled around. Slinking towards them, she could just

make out three other forms.

“THREE O’CLOCK! THREE O’CLOCK!”

“Steve...” she whispered shakily, raising the gun again as one of them jumped onto a pile of junk closer to them. He turned, and she heard his shaky gasp as he lifted the bat to point at it threateningly.

“CHARLOTTE! STEVE! ABORT! ABORT!” the bus door creaked open, and Dustin was screaming at them, but Charlotte couldn’t look away from the creatures. Then, with a snarl, Dart’s face opened and it leapt towards them – the others pouncing. Charlotte fired, the crack of the gun resounding off the surrounding trees. The thing dropped heavily, but was back on its feet the next second – and Charlotte heard the wet collision of Steve’s bat with one of them behind her.

She turned and jumped, rolling across the hood of the car, and firing again – hitting another in the shoulder mid leap – causing it to fall from its course and giving her enough time to scramble upward. The kids were screaming from the bus, and she reached out gripping Steve’s wrist as he scrambled to his feet – adrenaline pumping through her as she shot wildly behind her. She heard a yowl of pain and could only hope it had hit.

Steve picked up speed, and then he was dragging her. With a grunt, he half-tugged her, half-threw her forwards, making her stumble up the stairs of the bus, his body landing on top of hers a second later – winding her as the hard ridges of the stairs dug into her stomach. The door creaked shut again, just as the creatures threw themselves against it. Steve rolled off her, reaching up, and peeled a sheet of metal down to slam against the door. Charlotte focussed on breathing – pulling herself to her feet painfully.

The kids were still screaming, yelling – but she couldn’t focus on the words – dropping down to brace her feet against the metal next to Steve. His eyes were wild – but he steadied her, and they linked arms as the bus rocked with the force of the creatures’ collision with it.

An clawed arm got through and they all screamed, Steve reaching for the bat and slamming it down, blackish blood splattering on Charlotte’s face – making her gag. But she kept her place – bracing

against the creature as it tried to push through – Steve hitting at it over, and over again. Dustin was on the radio, screaming for help. Then the pressure that had been pushing against her disappeared as the arm retracted, and Charlotte went falling forwards, caught off balance.

Then a thud sounded on the roof.

She gasped, looking upwards. Max's screams made her rise, and she and Steve threw themselves towards the kids – Charlotte scooped them up, forcing them back and down into the seats as Steve positioned himself under the gap in the roof. "Out of the way!" he cried, and raised the bat, challengingly. "YOU WANT SOME? COME GET THIS!" he bellowed at the creature, and Charlotte could feel them shivering under her body, Max's face tucked into the crook of her neck, Dustin smashed to her front and Lucas curling into the safety of her extended arm. She cradled Max's head awkwardly with her gun-holding hand, as she craned to keep her eyes on Steve and the creature. She was panting, Steve shaking with rage and adrenaline – and then it quietened, the growing snarl of the creature as it prepared to jump cut off.

She watched it's flower petal face close slightly, head turning right as if it had heard something. It chittered, and then turned completely, moving away from the opening. Steve's jaw was clenched and he jumped as the crashes on the roof sounded, as it leapt from the top of the bus.

Charlotte met his eyes – both of them still heaving for breath. As if from a distance, she could hear them growling again. They were... leaving.

Slowly, she let go of the three kids, and got up – breath still short from her bruised lungs.

They pressed close to her, Lucas and Max holding their hands tightly – though they separated quickly. Steve was still holding the bat up, but Charlotte lowered the gun.

They had stopped.

Slowly, she stepped forwards – ignoring the hissed complaints and slid open the bus door cautiously peering out into the night. Steve’s body pressed against her back – and she felt one of his hands grip at hers shoulder as he leant over her, scanning the surroundings.

Slowly, they moved together out of the bus – both tensing at a faint growling, but Charlotte caught sight of the last of them, one of the ones she had shot, limping away as fast as it could.

“What happened?” Lucas asked.

“I don’t know.”

“They scared them off?” Dustin suggested.

Charlotte was already shaking her head when Steve responded. “No. No way.” He let go off her, and she stepped away from him, both of them turning – Steve’s bat raised to his shoulder, Charlotte’s gun still in hand. The three kids were looking at them in trepidation. “They’re going somewhere.” Steve said lowly.

“Something called them.” Charlotte bit her lip – and turned back to scan the dark landscape.

Something was about to happen. Something bad.

8. Eyes Shut

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys! Just wanted to drop a quick note that the song 'Eyes Shut' - the lyrics I use - belong to the band Years & Years.

Charlotte looked away from the three arguing pre-teens, back into the trees around them, something faint on the edge of her hearing catching her attention. There had been no signs of the creatures on their walk back through the forest, tense and quiet for the most part – Charlotte determinedly ignoring Steve, and Dustin ignoring Max and Lucas still in shock.

But now something sounded – and she took a step away from the bickering to strain her hearing. Steve's torchlight fell upon her, and he followed her as she moved off the tracks – squinting into the distance. "What is it?" he asked quietly.

Charlotte shook her head, and tilted her head. "I think- I think..." Steve moved beside her, and they reached the conclusion at the same time. "Hey, guys." She called nervously, trying to get the kids to stop their arguing. She sighed at the argument that continued behind them – and Steve turned.

"GUYS!" he yelled, effectively catching their attention. As their noise stopped – Charlotte was clearly able to hear the snarling growls echoing from over the outcropping. Steve looked down at her, and they shared a look – Steve hefting his bat over his shoulder, and Charlotte clicking the safety off on the gun, both of them breaking into a jog.

They broke out of the tree-line again, the kids joining them a beat later. But there was nothing, just fields, then the road and then more forest, and-

"The lab." Lucas said, holding up his binoculars. He lowered them with a dread-filled expression. "They were going back home."

"Come on." Charlotte said determinedly. "We've gotta get down there. Warn them if we can."

"If it's not already too late." Steve said quietly.

Charlotte shot him a sharp look. "*Don't.*" she hissed, and looked away from him – back at the lab, and squared her shoulders, before she set off at a hurried pace down the slope.

"*Hello?*"

Charlotte tensed. *She knew that voice.*

"Hello! Who's there?"

"*Jonathan.*" She breathed, and broke into a run – stumbling slightly as she went, torchlight wobbling all over the place.

"Whoa! Hey – Charlotte, wait-" Steve called after her, but she didn't stop, hurtling out of the tree-line and catching sight of Nancy and Jonathan next to the gate into the lab, squinting into the forest. They looked tired, but there was something different about them – they seemed to be... resolved somehow. Stronger, almost.

Their eyes widened in surprise as she came bounding towards them. "*Charlotte?*" they asked in unison. Charlotte didn't stop her mad approach, hurtling straight into Jonathan – whose arms came up to hold her automatically.

"Hi." She muttered breathlessly into his shoulder.

"Hey." He murmured back, squeezing her once before he stepped back, and looked her over. "What the hell are you-" his eyes landed on something over her shoulder.

"*Steve?*"

Nancy and Jonathan asked in unison again – frowning.

“Nancy?” Steve’s incredulous reply came, and Charlotte stepped back, as the others came walking towards them.

“Jonathan?” her brother looked between the two of them like he’d never seen them before.

“What *are* you doing here?” Nancy cried, voice strangely hostile. They began to walk towards each other, Charlotte and Jonathan following a step behind.

“What are *you* doing here?” Steve’s reply was slightly less sharp, but no less meaningful. Charlotte could see the guardedness that had come up in his eyes.

“We’re looking for Mike and Will.” Nancy explained as they met in the middle.

Dustin looked horrified. “They’re not in there, are they?”

Nancy looked confused now, and looked between Charlotte and Steve’s identical grave expressions. “We’re not sure.” She said uncertainly.

“Why?” Jonathan asked, meeting Charlotte’s gaze. She bit her lip – as a loud snarling growl came echoing from the building behind them. Jonathan’s face whitened, and she closed her eyes as another screech split the air around them.

Charlotte and Nancy swayed in their tight embrace, Charlotte feeling a swell of affection for the other girl as she recounted her and Jonathan’s misadventures over the last couple of days in a hushed whisper directly into her ear.

Charlotte also didn’t miss the way that Nancy smelled faintly like Jonathan’s aftershave, and the way she had skipped what had

happened the second night. Nor did she miss Jonathan's lingering gaze on Nancy, without the usual pining it usually held – or Steve's sad eyes. He was smart. He must have known as well.

She broke away from Nancy, and smiled at her. "You did the right thing."

"Yeah?" Nancy asked, ducking her head – looking unsure. "It-it felt right."

"Oh, I bet it did." Charlotte couldn't help the teasing note that crept into her voice, and Nancy didn't miss it – head jerking up as her cheeks flamed red.

"I- oh my- listen, you *cannot*-" she began in a fervent whisper, stuttering over herself. Charlotte held her hands up in surrender.

"Your secret's safe with me, Nancy Drew. Just don't break his heart, or I'll break you." She smiled, but there was an edge to it. Nancy nodded hastily.

The buzzing whine of the door release button sounded from inside the booth, and Dustin's victorious shout split the air. "Hey! I got it! I got it!" he stumbled out gleefully, as the others fell into line as the gate rolled slowly open. Charlotte and Nancy moved forwards, Jonathan moving to stand beside Nancy, taking her hand.

Charlotte couldn't help but look at Steve – who's gaze was firmly fixed on their intertwined hands. His jaw twitched, and his eyes moved quickly away – grip tightening on the hilt of his bat. Charlotte shifted awkwardly in place. *This was going to be difficult- but-*

Her face hardened.

But it didn't matter. Because she was nothing to him. So it didn't matter.

Then – a high, familiar scream.

"Joyce."

"Mom!"

Jonathan and Charlotte exchanged panicked glances, as Joyce's scream rang out again, and then, gunshots. Charlotte gasped.

"Go – J – go, drive!"

He nodded once, face set. Jonathan and Nancy scrambled for his car, and he gunned the engine, speeding off towards the lab. It only seemed like a few seconds later, when headlights reappeared, horns blaring as two cars hurtled out of the lab again. Charlotte's eyes widened at the speed, and shoved at Max and Lucas. "Out of the way, guys!" She stumbled backwards, dragging them with her. Steve had a firm grip on Dustin and was shielding him from the cars.

The chief's truck pulled up alongside them – the man himself clad in a hospital gown with wild eyes. "Come on! Get in!"

Steve spurred them into action, hurrying forwards and shoving Dustin into the back. Charlotte practically manhandling Lucas and Max in afterwards. It took her a second to realise that she was being given the same treatment by Steve, as he bundled her in with him – half lifting, half shoving her in the passenger seat and squeezing in next to her.

Hopper started the engine before Steve had even gotten the door closed, slamming his hand down with a cry of "Okay, let's go," before they were roaring away from the lab seconds later. Charlotte swallowed nervously at the speed they were taking the corners – no seat-belt on, just Steve's arm holding her in place, her hip digging painfully into the gearshift next to her, and her other side pressed flush against him.

The drive was silent, but for the kid's faint whispering, and Hopper's heavy breathing. Steve was biting the nails on his other hand – and despite her anger at him – she lifted her hand to grasp his wrist, tugging his fingers away from his mouth. He stared at her, eyes wide, mirroring the fear she knew must have been displayed in her own. She looked away from him – jerking her hand out of his grasp as he attempted to lace their fingers together. She knew what that was. He was jealous, hurt because of Nancy and Jonathan – and figured he could use her to make himself feel better, and Nancy feel jealous.

Well she wasn't that stupid.

Charlotte sat against the fridge, back pressed against the cold metal – the feeling grounding her. She could hear Hopper's angry voice as if from a world away, dead tired from the emotional and physical toll that had sent her spiralling down the drain to this semi-conscious state.

It was the quiet before the storm, though, she could feel it lingering – building. This was no resolution, no real escape from the dark horrors in the encroaching night – only a brief reprieve. The worst was yet to come, she could tell.

Charlotte tightened her arms that were holding her knees to her chest, trying to make herself smaller as Hopper left the kitchen, Mike seething at the table. It was near silent in the house, so Charlotte could hear Joyce's faint sobs from her room. She closed her eyes, unable to look at the grief, trepidation, and fear on the kids' faces in front of her – unable to keep watching Jonathan muttering to Will's prone form, Nancy's hand on his shoulder, Steve pacing incessantly. *Bob...*

Her heart ached. Ached for the man he was, the loss he left. It had already torn further into the hole that the Upside Down had started.

He had been kind. Funny. He had been brave. A hero.

"Did you guys know that Bob was the original founder of Hawkins AV?" Mike's soft voice made her open her eyes, willing away the wetness that was building in her tear ducts.

"Really?" Lucas sat up slightly, looking for a distraction.

"He partitioned the school to start it and everything. Then he had a fundraiser for equipment." Mike was smiling, a bittersweet smile. "Mr. Clarke learnt everything from him." He walked back over to the table, clutching at the blue puzzle that had belonged to the man in

both hands. Like it was precious. "Pretty awesome, right?"

"Yeah." Her brother said quietly, face still drawn. She bit her lip. Steve settled above her, leaning on the sink.

"We can't let him die in vain." Mike said,

Dustin's head snapped up, "Well, what do you wanna do, Mike? The Chief's right on this. We cant stop those Demo-dogs on our own."

"Demo-dogs?" The tense moment was broken by Max's questioning tone.

Dustin looked at her, and Charlotte felt a smile try to break out on her face – despite the morbidity of the situation. "Demogorgon. Dogs." He made a meshing motion with his hands. "Demo-dogs. It's like a compound. It's like... a play on words-

"Okay!" Max said hurriedly, blessedly cutting him off.

Dustin dropped his hands dejectedly. "I mean when it was just Dart, maybe..."

Lucas shook his head impatiently, "But there's an army now."

"Precisely." Dustin said, but Charlotte tuned him out, eyes flicking to Mike, who was frowning slightly. He had a concentrated faraway look in his eyes, the same look Nancy got when she was thinking hard. His was sharpened, both by the dark brown of his eyes, and the intensity of the gaze. She got up slowly.

"Mike..." his eyes met hers sharply. "What are you thinking?" she asked softly, trying to coax the boy to speak. *What horrors he had seen tonight...*

"His army." He said wildly.

She tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"His army!" he repeated, to his uncomprehending audience. Max frowned at him. "Maybe if we stop him, we can stop his army, too." Then he was turning, running out of the room. They all exchanged

glances, Steve meeting hers – and she looked away, unable to stomach whatever false earnestness was in his honey-brown eyes. Dustin stood up first, hurrying after his friend, the other two following quickly. Charlotte was only a beat behind them, Steve looming over all of them in the hallway as Mike shoved a sheet of paper into her grip. She frowned at the drawing of the spindly-legged creature. The one she'd been hearing so much about.

“The Shadow Monster.” Dustin said slowly, Mike’s eyes turning almost feverish.

“It got Will that day on the field. The doctor said it was like a virus, like it infected him.” Mike explained rapidly, and Charlotte passed the drawing to Max at her curious face.

“And so this virus, it’s connecting him to the tunnels?” Max asked, frowning deeply in concentration.

Mike turned on her, “To the tunnels, to the monsters, to the Upside Down – to everything.”

“Whoa. Slow down. Slow down.” Steve chimed in for the first time, the fledging look of concerned irritation that he had worn whilst bandaging her hand, and lecturing her about first-aid, blooming across his face. He took the paper from Max, and examined it.

Mike ignored him. “Okay, so. The Shadow Monster’s inside everything, and if the vines feel something like pain, then so does Will.”

“And so does Dart.” Lucas said, pointing a knowing finger at Mike.

Mike nodded, “Yeah. Like what Mr. Clarke taught us – the hive mind.”

“The... hive mind?” Steve shook his head bemusedly, arms coming up to cross over his chest.

Dustin looked exasperated, and turned to him to explain. “A collective consciousness. It’s a super organism.”

“And this is the thing that controls everything. It’s like the brain.”

Mike jabbed at the drawing viciously – as if that small action would reach the monster.

“Like the Mind Flayer.” Dustin said, eyes going wide. Mike and Lucas’ jaws dropped – and Lucas clicked, pointing a finger at Dustin’s analogy.

Max, Steve and Charlotte shared a quick look of confusion. “The *what?*” they asked in unison.

Charlotte jumped back slightly, as her brother slammed down his Dungeons and Dragons manual, open on a page displaying an illustration of a man with tentacles for mouth in a flowing robe.

“The Mind Flayer.” He said, as if it explained everything.

Hopper craned over her to catch a glimpse, brow creasing. “What the hell is that?” he asked roughly.

“It’s a monster from an unknown dimension. It’s so ancient, it doesn’t even know it’s true home. It enslaves races of other dimensions by taking over their brains by using its highly developed psionic powers.” Dustin explained avidly.

“Oh my god, none of this is real.” Hopper growled. “This is a kid’s game.”

“No, it-it’s a manual.” Dustin stuttered. “And it’s not for kids!” he finished defensively. “And unless you know something that we don’t, this is the best metaphor-”

“Analogy.” Lucas corrected quietly.

“Analogy.” Dustin looked at him in disbelief. “That’s what you’re worried about?” he half-shouted, temper rising along with the tension in the room. Charlotte put a gentle hand on his shoulder, squeezing him slightly. “Fine. An analogy for understanding whatever

the hell this is.”

Charlotte nodded. “Okay, so this mind flamer thing-”

“Flayer. Mind Flayer.” Dustin said irritably, and Charlotte sighed heavily, leaning her weight forward on the kitchen table.

“What does it want?” she asked the room at large.

“To conquer us, basically.” Dustin said, “It believes it’s the master race.”

“Like the- like the Germans.” Steve said confidently. At people’s frowns, he shrunk back slightly.

“Uh, the Nazis?” Dustin offered.

Steve looked nervous. “Uh, yeah, yeah – yeah the Nazis.” He amended, and shut his mouth tightly, avoiding the eyes of the room on him.

Dustin tried to run with it. “Uh, yeah – if the Nazis were from another dimension, uh, totally. It views other races, like us, as inferior to itself.”

Charlotte watched as Hopper groaned, putting a hand over his eyes briefly. Nancy peered over her shoulder at the page. “Okay, so, if this thing is like a brain that’s controlling everything, then if we kill it-”

“We kill everything it controls.” Mike said firmly, making eye contact with his sister.

“We win.” Dustin said.

“Theoretically.” Lucas said solemnly.

Hopper took the book from Nancy. “Alright, great – so how do we kill this thing? Shoot it with fireballs or something?”

Dustin chuckled. “No. No, no fireballs.” At Hopper’s intense gaze, he swallowed. “Uh, you summon an undead army, uh, because...” he shrunk under Hopper’s eyes. “Because zombies, you know, they-they

don't have brains, and th-the Mind Flayer, it likes... brains. It's just a game. It's a game..." he trailed off as Hopper slammed the book back on the table.

"What the hell are we doing here?" he growled, and stormed from the room.

"I thought we were waiting for your military backup." Dustin called after him, hiding his embarrassment with bravado, as usual.

"We are!" Hopper cried, turning back to face them.

"But even if they come, how are they going to stop this?" Mike yelled back at him, uncowed by the anger in Hopper's gaze. "You can't just shoot this with guns!"

"You don't know that! We don't know anything!"

Mike took a furious step closer. "We know it's already killed everyone in that lab."

"And we *know* the monsters are going to moult again." Lucas added.

"And we know that it's only a matter of time before those tunnels reach this town." Dustin finished.

"They're right."

They all turned at Joyce's tremulous voice. She was standing in the middle of the hallway, still in the clothes from the lab, eyes shining with unshed tears. "We have to kill it." Something soft broke across Hopper's face then, and he crossed the room to her. "*I want* to kill it." She said, shakily – but firmly.

"Me too. Me too, Joyce, okay? But how do we do that?" Hopper asked, a hint of panic rising in his tone. "We don't exactly know what we're dealing with here."

"No." Mike interrupted. "But he does." He was looking at Will's unconscious body on the couch, face set. "If anyone knows how to destroy this thing, it's Will. He's connected to it, he'll know its weakness."

“I thought we couldn’t trust him anymore.” Max asked worriedly. “That he’s a spy for the Mind Flayer now.”

Charlotte moved towards the sleeping boy, along with the others in the room, bottom lip caught tight between her teeth. *If Mike was saying what she thought he was...*

“Yeah, but he can’t spy if he doesn’t know where he is.”

Charlotte hissed out a breath, eyes fluttering shut as another wave of worry washed over her – making her sway in place. A hand splayed between her shoulder blades, large and annoyingly familiar. She stepped out of Steve’s steadying touch, and towards Hopper – looking to help, looking to avoid the boy behind her.

Steve watched Charlotte head for the kitchen with something roiling in his gut.

Unease. Worry, maybe. Fear – fear for certain, because he felt like they were all balancing on the edge of a cliff. Something was going to happen, he knew that much. But it didn’t explain the cold coil of *something* that tugged at his insides as he watched her avoid his eyes, lean out of his touch, almost run to get out of the same room as him.

He clenched his jaw.

She’d been stony since the junkyard – maybe it was her own fear, she’d been prickly when she was emotional before – but not like this. Not cold and avoidant like this. She had never shied away from telling him he was an asshole before. Even when she had stopped him from going alone out into the night – she had been closed over, frosty and removed in her irritation.

It... hurt.

He’d thought that they were making progress. He felt a closeness to her that he hadn’t felt in a long time – not since the beginning of his

and Nancy's relationship, a easiness that he associated with their earliest friendship, back when they were just kids. It was like she'd suddenly shut a door, like nothing had ever happened, and nothing would happen, between them.

He followed Hopper to the Byer's shed obediently, so deep in racking his brains for what he could have done – that it wasn't until Nancy even spoke that he realised she had sidled up to him as he stapled sheeting along the walls.

“Hey.”

He tensed, and bit his tongue – anger and old hurt making his chest pang. He looked up at her, unsure what exactly she could have to say to him, or him to her. Not now. Not in the middle of all this, after all the shit she had done to him.

“What you did, um, helping the kids... that was... really cool.” She said, with a soft smile that Steve found unbearably pitying and patronising all at once.

He didn't allow himself to gape at her. “Yeah.” He looked away from her, and because he was a sucker, and he loved her with a painful, all-consuming passion – or at least he had, he thought – he couldn't help but respond to her. “Those shits are real trouble, you know.”

She seemed happy. He snorted quietly. *Yes, ease your conscience, Nance. Don't worry! I'm totally fine that you ran off with the guy you said you weren't cheating on me with, after saying I was bullshit, and everything was bullshit.* “Believe me, I know.” she said laughingly, like she had used to speak to him.

He stapled the sheeting down with a little more force than necessary.

Charlotte stared unseeingly at the leftovers she was reheating. *She needed to feed the kids, she needed to look after them, make sure they were okay, then she needed to see how Jonathan was doing, check that*

the shed was coming along in time-

“That’s been done for a while.”

Charlotte jumped, hand flying to the pistol at her hip, and whirling on the intruder. Max sucked in a breath – stepping back hastily.

“Sorry...” she mumbled quietly, as Charlotte stowed the gun away and pressed her shaking hands to her eyes. She shook her head at the younger girl, and tried to shoot her a smile.

From the vaguely worried look in Max’s sky-blue eyes, she could guess it hadn’t been convincing. “It’s okay. I’m just...”

“I get it.” Max said quietly. She shot a look behind her, as if to check they were alone. She ducked her head, lowering her gaze. “I’m afraid.” She whispered, confessing.

Charlotte’s heart went out to the displaced looking girl. Gently – so slowly and gently – she moved towards the girl, and put her arms around her. Max gave a surprised little twitch in her grip – but settled almost immediately, pressing her face into Charlotte’s collarbone. “So am I.” She whispered back. “But that’s okay.”

Max took a shuddering breath, and sagged against her slightly, hands coming up uncertainly to grip around Charlotte’s middle. “But you’re so brave.” She muttered. “I watched you... you didn’t even look afraid out there. And you protected us – in the bus. You would have rather it hurt you than us.” There was a sad sort of wonderment in her tone, and Charlotte’s mind went briefly to the violent nature of her step-brother, and squeezed her tighter in understanding.

“I was afraid. But my brother- you kids – you’re more important than a little bit of fear.” She explained. “The people you care about – that’s where you get it from. They’re the ones who’ll inspire you to be brave.”

Max nodded her head slightly. “I care about them.” She said quietly. Charlotte smiled sadly. “Even though I don’t- I *can’t* show it sometimes. They’re my friends.”

Charlotte ran a hand through the girl’s hair. “And they’ll know that.

Just stick with them. Loyalty is everything.”

“Loyalty is everything.” Max repeated under her breath. Charlotte forgot about the food in the microwave, and just held the younger girl – tried to give her what comfort and warmth she could before the real nightmare began.

Steve kept half an eye on Charlotte’s slumped form on the couch in his peripheries. He had seen the way she had hastily wiped under her eyes before she and Max had entered the shed to help set up. She looked so deeply sad, hiding it behind an encouraging smile for her brother, and a wink for Jonathan.

He swung the bat with more vigour.

It was a waiting game now.

“Dustin.”

Charlotte called out softly for her brother, who was pacing in the next room, running his hands through his hair – tugging on the curls with some force. He looked up, blue eyes wide with worry. It made her chest feel tight to see him like this.

She beckoned him towards her – and it was a mark of how upset he was that he went to her willingly, and curled up beside her without a word. She gently rested his head against her shoulder, and brushed back his curls from his face as she had when she had been putting him to sleep as a toddler. “It’s going to be alright.” She whispered to him, hugging him tight.

“What if it isn’t.”

Charlotte headbutted him slightly, making him smile slightly. “When have I ever been wrong, huh?” Dustin shrugged. “Exactly. You just listen to me, Mr. Dusty B.”

Dustin raised an eyebrow at her. “You know, you’ve got to stop quoting Grease if you want people to take you seriously.”

She shot him a playful scowl, and hugged him again. “As if. I’m plenty serious. I’m like a superhero now, remember?” she nudged him teasingly.

But his face was serious. “You are.”

She sighed. “Come on, Dusty. Just breathe. Everything will be okay. It’s us against the world, remember? Everyone’s here together. It’s like the Avengers.”

“Yeah. You and Steve are like Thor and Captain America. The strongest Avengers. Hopper can be the Hulk, cause he’s old and angry.” Dustin said, smiling slightly. Charlotte grew quiet, and he looked at her, smile fading. “Right?”

“Yeah. Me and Steve.” She muttered. She looked over to where the man in question had been standing, swinging his bat. He was watching them, watching her – with disquiet in his eyes. She had to look away.

The lights flickered overhead, and Charlotte was on her feet immediately, one hand flying to her gun, and the other pushing Dustin back into the couch. Her eyes roved the room, looking for the threat, until she remembered what was happening. She stayed where she was, however, unable to fight the adrenaline making her muscles twitch. Steve and Nancy ran to the window as Dustin shrank slightly, looking up at her with wide eyes.

It quietened after that, the lights stabilizing – and the house was deathly still, none of them daring to speak.

Then the back door banged open and Hopper rushed in, looking frantic. The others followed close behind him.

“What happened?” she demanded, as he hurriedly pulled out a notepad and his eyes darted around the room. Realising what he was looking for, she grabbed the nearest pen and pressed it into his hand. He shot her a thankful look, and bent over the notepad.

“I think he’s talking, just not with words.” He said, drawing a series of dots and lines. Charlotte’s eyes widened.

“What is that?” Steve asked, leaning over Hopper’s other shoulder.

“*Morse code.*” The room replied, and Charlotte caught sight of his confused and weirded out expression before he looked to the page again.

“H-E-R-E.” Hopper read aloud, writing out the letters below the code.

Joyce and Jonathan sucked in a worried breath, exchanging glances above her. “Here.” Mike said lowly. Charlotte clenched her fist, and lowered her head slightly as a wave of relief washed over her – so intense she felt her knees weaken slightly.

“Will’s still in there. He’s still talking to us.”

The next moments were a flurry of motion as they ran in and about the house, collecting memories to further spur Will’s communication. The kids and Steve and Nancy stayed in the house, collecting and recording Will’s messages.

Charlotte hovered just outside the light, fingers wrapped nervously around an old guitar that Joyce had produced from the pile of scrap they had evicted from the shed. As the last chords of The Clash faded, Jonathan stood up, and gave her an encouraging smile.

She cleared her throat as she sat in front of the secured boy. His dark

eyes were almost dead, his mouth fixed in a distressed frown. He looked pale – too pale. She smiled weakly. “Hey, Will. I know you probably don’t remember me right now – but I hope you remember this song.”

His fingers were still – no flash of recognition in those empty pupils.

She took a deep breath, as her fingers wavered over the guitar strings – tuning it with trembling hands. She hadn’t played in so long now – and her arm ached at the unnatural contortion of it, into the position that had used to be so easy. Gently she plucked the opening notes and chords, easing into the song she had half-composed in the hospital, the one she had polished over late nights when she couldn’t sleep, the one she had sometimes heard Dustin hum snatches of – saying that Will had been singing it without realising. She closed her eyes, and tried not to fall into the darkness in Will’s gaze. It hurt.

“And it starts again. You come over with your friends, I don't want to talk to them, and all I really want is to start again. No. And I, yeah, I've got the lines, I've got the lines. Oh it's brighter this time, this type of mine, this disguise. Oh you talk, oh to me.”

Charlotte chanced a look at the boy, and saw the faint of sheen of tears building across his eyes. It was silent in the shed – no one seemed to even be breathing. Charlotte felt her heart sink as Will remained still. But then-

A faint tapping started build underneath her guitar, and she watched as his finger began to tap out something frantically. She couldn’t help the smile that grew on her face, and closed her eyes again – singing with everything she had.

“Nothing's gonna hurt me with my eyes shut, I can see through them, I can see through them. And I am drawing pictures, I'm evading, I will not use them, I will not use them.”

Charlotte froze as the distinct sound of a phone ringing cut through Joyce's teary expression of love. Hopper's looked towards the house, horror building across his face. Will's head jerked towards the sound, like a dog catching a scent. Then his eyes rolled up, moving rapidly behind his eyelids. Charlotte lowered the guitar shakily, backing towards the door as Joyce called to him.

But it was Hopper's voice that made her start running towards the house.

"It knows. It knows where we are."

She stopped dead in the yard, craning her hearing – looking into the dark surroundings. Then, as Jonathan, Hopper and Mike filed out behind her – Jonathan resting a hand on her shoulder – the distant screeching of the creatures echoed through the night.

She let out a choked gasp – heart sinking, even as adrenaline started turning her blood white hot.

9. The Beginning and End

A hand closed around Charlotte's wrist, and she looked up at Hopper – who was frowning down at the gun in her grasp.

“How long have you had that?”

She swallowed. “A while.” She admitted.

“And where do you keep it?”

“On me.” She said quietly.

“Even at school?” anger warred with concern on his face and she bit her lip – nodding slightly. “Charlotte-”

She ripped her wrist out of his grip. “It makes me feel safer okay? And I know how to use it.” She turned to leave the room, but he grabbed her again.

Hopper shook his head, “We’re not done talking about this, kid.” At her glare he sighed. “But not right now. You got ammo?”

When she shook her head uneasily, he beckoned her to follow him – and they hurried through the house, picking up a shot gun along the way – and he pressed a box of bullets into her hand, before hurrying towards the living room, leaving her alone to reload in the kitchen.

She walked in, eyes widening at the sight of Hopper, Steve and Nancy lined up in front of the door – Hopper holding his rifle, Steve wielding his bat, and Nancy angling the shotgun at the windows. She took a slow breath, and walked up to fall into line in between Steve and Nancy, raising the gun.

The others shifted behind them, but they were still – even Steve keeping his bat steady, not even bouncing on the balls of his feet as he usually did.

“Where are they?” Max cried, unable to take the tension. The screeching was closer, but it was impossible to tell where it was coming from. Charlotte didn’t turn to comfort her, instead, gritting

her teeth and scanning the foliage outside the window. Then, a loud thud and a growl came from the other window, and they turned in unison – the kids, Jonathan and Joyce gasping and crying out.

“What are they doing?” Nancy breathed, the muzzle of her gun shaking slightly – the only indication of her fear. The bush outside the window rustled, the sounds of the monsters even closer than ever.

Another sound from the other window made them swivel again, and Charlotte let out a shaky breath. “They’re surrounding us.” She bit out, and Nancy let out a soft noise. It screeched again, a horrible wet, grating sound. Then with a high pitched whine, the sound was abruptly choked off. Charlotte frowned, and lowered her gun, stepping closer to the window-

With a shattering of glass, something launched itself through the window. There was a scream of her name, but she had already dropped to the ground, so quickly that her elbow scraped roughly on the hardwood floor. She scrambled backwards on all fours, as Hopper angled his gun at the creature that had landed in the corner of the room. An arm scooped her up, lifting her to her feet and tugging her back against a solid chest – but she didn’t have time to look at who was holding her – not when it became apparent that the creature wasn’t moving. She didn’t take her eyes off it.

Hopper moved forwards, gun still aimed on the thing.

“Holy shit.” Dustin said softly.

“Is it dead?” Max asked nervously.

Hopper didn’t reply, but instead, reached out with his foot – and nudged it. Its head lolled back – too easily – revealing the broken neck that had somehow killed it.

“Jesus.” A familiar voice breathed in her ear, and she stiffened – stepping out of Steve’s arm immediately. He looked at her, frowning now – and opened his mouth to speak.

Then the door creaked.

Charlotte was lifting the gun again – as the lock clicked open,

seemingly of it's own accord. Then, as the safety chain began to slide unlocked – Hopper stepped forwards. Then the door swung slowly open.

Revealed in the doorway was a face Charlotte didn't think she'd ever see again.

The girl wore ill-fitting jeans, and an oversized black suit jacket – and with her hair slicked back and her eyes ringed in the dark shadow, coupled with the trail of blood snaking out of her nose – she looked like some sort of super villain. But she wasn't. She was a friend.

Eleven.

Charlotte watched with wide eyes and an open mouth as Eleven and Mike stepped towards each other. It was like all the gravity in the room had coalesced and pulled them towards each other – nothing else existing but each other. As they fell into each other's arms with quiet utterances of the other's name, Charlotte felt the strange urge to cry.

Mike pulled away from her then, eyes shining with tears. "I never gave up on you." He said shakily. "I called you every night. Every night for-"

"353 days." Eleven finished breathlessly. "I heard."

"Why didn't you tell me you were there?" there was a hint of betrayal in Mike's voice now, confusion filling his eyes. "That you were okay?"

"Because I wouldn't let her." The room turned as one, as Hopper spoke up reluctantly. He was looking at Eleven with a strange, fierce warmth. He stepped towards her. "The hell is this? Where've you been?"

"Where have *you* been?" Eleven snarled back at him, but went straight into his arms, and Hopper closed his eyes as he hugged her

tightly to him.

Something dark dawned in Mike's eyes and he swallowed thickly. "You've been hiding her." he said lowly, "You've been hiding her this whole time!" he launched himself at Hopper, shoving at him roughly.

Hopper turned, and grabbed Mike by the collar. "Hey! Let's talk." He growled, Mike's hands coming up to claw at his grip, but he was immovable. "*Alone*." He stressed. Then he half-dragged, half-walked with Mike's furious muttering out of the room.

Charlotte only watched them go for a moment, before she turned back to Eleven and offered the slightly lost looking girl a smile. "Welcome back, El. You've been missed." Eleven looked at her, and hesitantly smiled back.

"Thank you." She said softly. And then her eyes fell on Dustin and Lucas – who exchanged a look before hurrying towards the girl. She welcomed them with open arms.

"We missed you." Lucas said, beaming over her shoulder.

"I missed you too." Eleven replied easily.

Dustin grinned. "We talked about you pretty much everyday." They pulled apart, still smiling at each other.

Then Eleven frowned, and reached for Dustin's mouth, prodding at his lips and gums. "Teeth."

Dustin bent out of her touch. "What?"

"You have teeth." Eleven amended, still looking faintly confused.

Dustin smiled knowingly. "Oh." He exchanged a look with Lucas. "You like these pearls?" then he bared his teeth and made a gross little purring sound, making Charlotte recoil in disgust.

"Eleven?" Max stepped forwards, excitement and wonder in her small smile. "Hey. Um, I'm Max." She stuck out her hand. "I've heard a lot about you." Eleven looked at it, and then at Max – Eleven's face twisting, before she shoved past the red head. Charlotte frowned

slightly, both at Eleven's rejection, and at the slightly heartbroken look on Max's face.

Joyce wrapped Eleven in her arms, sniffing slightly. "Hey. Hey, sweetheart." They were both crying – a bond there built on horror and pain. As they left the room together, Charlotte gathered herself slightly, and clapped her hands together.

"Okay. For real. Kids need to eat now! There is cereal and leftovers that are still warm. Come on, come on!" she shepherded her brother, Lucas and the still frozen Max into the kitchen – catching Jonathan and Nancy's arms as well. "You too." She cast a look over her shoulder at Steve. "You should probably eat something." She tried to sound dismissive – but pathetically – it came off as concerned.

His eyes softened, and she hurried out of the room before he could say anything.

"It's not like it was before. It's grown. A lot." Hopper said slowly, and Charlotte shuddered at the thought of the twisting tunnels that could be below them that very moment, and the monumental gate. She hunkered down further over the sink, scrubbing harder at the plate in her hand. *The beginning and end of all things*. "And, I mean, that's considering we can even get in there, the place is crawling with those dogs."

"Demodogs." Dustin corrected him quickly. Hopper shot him a look.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, uh, demodogs." Dustin replied innocuously. "Like Demogorgon and dogs." He explained, and Charlotte fought the urge to groan. She did *not* want to rehash this conversation. "You put em' together and it sounds pretty badass."

"How is this important right now?" Hopper interrupted him.

Dustin looked away. "It's not. I'm sorry."

"I can do it." Eleven's voice broke the tense atmosphere. She'd been still and silent ever since Joyce suggested the closing of the gate.

"You're not hearing me." Hopper dismissed.

Eleven didn't back down. "I'm hearing you. I can do it."

Hopper didn't reply, searching her eyes. Mike piped up from beside him. "Even if El can, there's still another problem. If the brain dies, the body dies."

"I thought that was the whole point." Max said, brow creasing.

Mike shook his head. "It is, but if we're really right about this... I mean, if El closes the gate and kills the Mindflyer's army..."

"Will's a part of that army." Lucas finished quietly. Charlotte felt nausea roil in her stomach at the very thought...

"Closing the gate will kill him." Mike vocalised the thing no one wanted to hear.

Charlotte couldn't help but look at Joyce, look at the panic and determination and hopelessness and despair war for primary spot within her. Wordlessly, she stood up – and left the room. Exchanging looks, they followed her – all of them clustering in the doorway as Joyce stood over Will's body.

"He likes it cold." She whispered.

"What?" Hopper asked gently.

"It's what Will kept saying to me." Joyce said, a little louder now, nodding as some realisation gave her strength. "He likes it cold." With swift movements, she crossed the room and decisively slammed the open window shut. "We keep giving it what it wants."

Charlotte felt understanding dawn on her, shivering slightly as the cold of the room became apparent to her. "If this is a virus, and Will is the host..." she began, looking to Jonathan as his head turned

towards her.

“Then we need to make the host uninhabitable.” He finished, turning to look back at his brother.

Nancy stepped forwards slightly, face set with determination. “So if he likes it cold...”

“We need to burn it out of him.” Joyce bit out, eyes wide and wild.

“We have to do it somewhere he doesn’t know this time!” Mike piped up, Dustin nodding in agreement.

“Yeah, somewhere faraway.”

Hopper’s brows drew together. “I know a place. Right. Joyce, Jonathan – you can take him to my cabin. Come with me, I’ll show you where to go.” Charlotte flattened herself against the wall as they strode out, Hopper picking up Will before he followed them out.

Nancy’s face grew serious. “I need to go with them.” She said quietly, and looked to Charlotte – face pleading.

Charlotte reached out, and Nancy grabbed her hand. “Then go. He’ll need you.”

“Yeah.” She muttered, and squeezed Charlotte’s hand. “Be careful.” She turned to address the rest of the crowd in Will’s room. Steve was watching her, face unreadable. She smiled hesitantly at him, before looking to the kids. “You *all* be careful, okay?”

Charlotte couldn’t help the twisted, ugly feeling that rose in her as Steve volunteered instantly to help Nancy look for heaters in the garbage pile.

She couldn’t help the way her eyes followed them, and the way her chest seized at the way he held the door open for her.

Of course he still loved her – he would always love her. Doesn't matter that she cheated, doesn't matter that he held her hands in the middle of the night and told her that he cared-

But fuck – none of that mattered, not in the face of this horror. Not when they were going to war and she was about to be left behind.

So when Hopper put his head into the room and told her that he and El were going to the lab – she couldn't help but say what she did.

"I'm going with you." She said. His eyes actually widened, before a small smile took over his face.

"Wha- no you're not, Henderson, you're staying here and watching the kids. They *need* you." He said, shoving boxes of ammunition into his coat.

She felt her chest tighten at the thought of her brother's face. "Steve can watch them. They *need* me to *kill* this thing – or at least... I don't know, help."

"Trust me, Charlotte – El will be doing the killing. I'm going to watch her back. It's a little too heavy-" Hopper turned to leave, and Charlotte bit back a scream of frustration. She needed to do this. She couldn't just sit around and do nothing – she could fight, and she had a gun and knew how to use it-

"And who's going to watch yours?" Charlotte asked sharply, "Hopper – you know I can use a gun, and *you* were the one who told me that it doesn't matter how scared you are, it just matters that you face it in the end! I can't just wait around here to hear that you've been mauled by one of those dogs and left to die – and then sit with my gun by the door waiting for them to come and kill us. I can't. I won't!"

"Jesus Christ." Hopper ran a hand over his eyes. "Charlotte-"

"I'll be more help with you than sitting here. If Eleven can close the gate, then I can shoot down a few fucking demodogs."

Hopper made a snarling sound, whipping his head around to face her. "Fine! Fine – but *you* can explain to *your* brother that you're coming

with me.”

Charlotte didn't have time to feel relief. Instead, she nodded, feeling resolve and fear make her whole body tense. “I'll meet you in the truck.”

“You have five minutes.” Hopper grunted, and left the room with a dark look on his face, but left two boxes of ammo – and Nancy's rifle on the kitchen table – along with a holster. Charlotte moved over to them, and took out her smaller handgun again, and loaded it, before buckling up the holster around her waist and shoving it in. She went through the same process with the rifle – familiarising herself with the grip and safety.

“What are you doing?” A small voice from the doorway made her spin. Dustin was standing there, blue eyes wide and fearful.

“Dusty – I'll be back, okay, I'm going-”

“No. No! No – don't, Lottie! Please!” he launched himself at her, grabbing at her wrists and trying to tug her towards the lounge. “Please – you'll die! I can't- you don't understand-”

“Dustin!” she pulled her hand free of his grasp, and cradled his cheeks instead. “I *will* come back to you, okay? I made you a promise – do you remember?”

“*I will never leave you, because it's us against the world.*” Dustin recited, voice hoarse, gulping as he tried to blink away the tears gathering in his eyes. “I remember – but it's not just us against the *world* – it's monsters, and demons and-”

“And have I ever broken a promise before?” She asked gently, cutting off his babbling. Wordlessly he shook his head, but tears started spilling over. “Dustin, you said it – I'm like Thor, right? I need to help save the world – and I can't here. Steve will-”

As if summoned by his name, Steve had appeared in the back door. His eyes went wide as he took in the tableaux before him – and he was shaking his head before she even got to finish his sentence. “No. No, you're not going. No – Charlotte-”

“Steve will look after you.” She spoke firmly over him. “Because he’s a hero too. Now I’ve got to go. You promise me, you’ll stay safe?”

Dustin nodded jerkily, eyes fluttering shut as she pressed a kiss to his forehead. Charlotte picked up the rifle and made to leave the room. As she entered the hallway, a hand wrapped around her wrist – and spun her, making her thump back against the wall painfully. Steve was in front of her, brown eyes wide with some unnamed emotion, and jaw working furiously. He was barely inches away.

“What, Harrington?” she snapped, trying to wrench herself free.

“You can’t go.” He said lowly.

That stopped her struggling. “Why? Because the almighty King Steve commands it?” she snapped viciously – taking a sick delight in the flinch he gave, something like hurt making his mouth tight.

He looked away furiously. “No, because – because-”

“Oh fuck *off*, Harrington. Don’t pretend you care.” She shoved at him, hard enough for him to stumble backwards. She headed towards the door, fury giving her speed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” he was yelling now – voice drawing the attention of the kids from the living room. Charlotte couldn’t find the energy to tell them to look away – instead, she focussed all the anger and bitterness she had been stewing in on the source of her ire – whipping the door open and whirling on him.

“It means ‘*she’s nothing!*’” She spat his words back at him. “*There’s nothing between you and I.*’ Or did I mishear all that? I’m nothing to you Harrington – you said it yourself.” She finished quietly, all the fight seeping out of her, as something numbing starting creeping over her – traitorous tears building in her eyes as she looked at him – daring, *hoping* him to say something, to contradict her. But he said nothing, gaped at her – face so remote it was like looking at a stranger. She laughed suddenly. “Fuck. This is perfect. At least be kind enough to watch Dustin.” At his continued silence, she shook her head, feeling a tear slip down her cheek – and turned away from him, hurrying down the stairs towards Hopper and Eleven. She

couldn't help but look back, holding on tightly to the handle in the back of Hopper's truck. They were all standing on the stairs, watching them leave.

She put her head down, and cried, ugly and burning hot tears as they drove towards the end.

10. Blood, Sweat & Tears

The lab was eerily silent when they arrived – only the occasional screech from the demodogs breaking the stillness.

Charlotte scrubbed hurriedly at her cheeks as Hopper opened the back for her to jump out. She could feel his eyes on her – but to her relief, he said nothing. She approached Eleven, who was staring up at the building with a glazed look in her eyes.

The warning lights were still flashing – a sickly orange yellow, glowing through the windows.

She swallowed thickly, looking up at the sheer size of the place.

“Alright.” Hopper broke the silence, cocking his shotgun as he walked up to them. He met her eyes. “You let me do the heavy lifting upfront, alright? You’ll bring up behind – keep El in the middle.”

Charlotte nodded wordlessly, and at Eleven’s nervous glance, brought her hand up to squeeze the girl’s shoulder. “You just save your strength for when we’re down there, yeah?”

The girl didn’t say anything, returning her gaze to the lab. But her face had changed, resolve darkening her features. “You okay?” Hopper asked gently. Eleven said nothing – then started marching on the lab, face set. Hopper shot Charlotte a look, to which she shrugged, and hurried after the girl, unholstering her handgun. She heard him groan quietly in frustration – and then his footsteps hurry to catch them.

It had been a clear run so far – no encounters with any of the creatures – and Charlotte couldn’t help but wonder if it was luck, or a trap. The bodies strewn across the floor were not helping with her unease – and her stomach had been roiling with nausea since she had

seen Bob's corpse, right inside the entrance way.

That – she hadn't been prepared for – and she'd had to force back tears that had threatened to spill over again, burning her tear ducts. Every new body, every splatter of blood both repulsed her and motivated her. All this carnage – and they were going to stop it. They *had* to stop it.

They moved swiftly, Eleven almost forced into a jog as they hurried after Hopper's quick, quiet steps. Charlotte kept wincing at Eleven's footsteps – her docs echoing loudly with every step. Her own worn sneakers had little grip – but were practically silent.

As they descended into the stairwell – Hopper paused, lifting his gun. Charlotte made out the faintest sound.

A human sound.

"Stay here." Hopper said warningly, and Charlotte stayed Eleven, putting a hand on her shoulder and pushing her back into the corner slightly. "Oh shit." Hopper's faint exclamation made Charlotte frown, resisting the urge to follow the man. She could hear his voice – talking to someone, but she couldn't quite make out his words.

She looked at Eleven. "Stay behind me, okay?" the girl nodded, and Charlotte toted her gun, moving quickly and quietly down the stairs to where Hopper was. It took her a second to work out that the pile of torn and bloody clothing he was hunched over was a man. It was only when the flash of the warning light reflected off the sweat on his face, did she realise he was alive still – and staring at Eleven with suspicion and fascination.

Hopper, catching his gaze – looked over his shoulder at them, shooting Charlotte an exasperated look. He turned back to the man. "Oh yeah. I've been meaning to tell ya. This is Charlotte Henderson and Eleven. Girls, this is Doc Owens. Eleven's been staying with me for about a year, and she's about to save our asses. Maybe when this is all said and done, maybe you could help her out, too, you know?" Charlotte had to admire the man's gall – as Owens looked at him in faint disbelief. "Maybe you could help her lead, like, a normal life. One where she's not poked and prodded and... treated like some sort

of lab rat, you know? I don't know." Hopper fixed him with a steely look, and tightened his belt around Owen's leg, making the man groan with pain. "Just a thought. Uh. Think about it." Hopper clapped the man's shoulder, and stood, pulling out a smaller pistol, and handing it to the doctor. "Don't go anywhere." He said, and Owens chuckled weakly.

Hopper jerked his head, and Charlotte pushed Eleven after the man as he descended the stairs, torch cutting through the gloom.

The air was thickening, fouling – little flakes of *something* floating around them. Charlotte pulled up the neck of her turtleneck warily, hoping to avoid breathing any of them in. The corridor had darkened – and the flickering fluorescents weren't helping the rising fear she was feeling. The tension had been building since they'd stepped foot in the place, and with no sign of the demodogs – she felt like a ticking time bomb of nerves.

Then, as Hopper's torchlight weakly permeated the darkness surrounding the door at the end of the corridor, she heard it – faint chittering snarls from near them. She swallowed, and tightened her grip on her gun.

"Stay here." Hopper said lowly, and took a careful step forwards, and headed down and around the corner. Eleven's breathing picked up audibly, and Charlotte stepped closer to her.

"It'll be alright, El." She whispered, and though the girl said nothing, Charlotte felt her lean into her body slightly – as if assuring herself she wasn't alone.

Then – a loud cacophony of the harsh screeches of the monsters came from before them – and Charlotte jumped, raising her gun and wrapping an arm around Eleven, the girl's hands coming up to hold onto it as it wrapped around her chest. But no gun-shots, and no screams.

And then – the sound was gone, echoing out of her range of hearing as if – as if they'd disappeared – or been called away. Charlotte looked down at Eleven, both of them with identical wide-eyed faces of confusion.

“Girls!”

Hopper's sharp call made them disentangle themselves, and sprint to elevator room. They slowed their pace as they entered, the destruction and lack of demodogs making Charlotte stop and stare in confusion. He turned to look at them, a bemused look on his face – as if he was about to say something. Then, the radio on his belt crackled, and Jonathan's voice came through.

“Chief, are you there? Chief, do you copy?”

Hopper unhooked it quickly, and brought it to his mouth. “Yeah, I copy.” He said almost breathlessly.

“Close it.” Jonathan panted.

Charlotte felt elation mingle with dread. Will was free – but now the final battle remained.

The rattling elevator wasn't the only sound as they descended. There was a faint pulse in the air – an old, ancient rumble, from the glowing red Gate in front of them. It looked like an open wound in the earth, pulsing with energy and red-orange light. Charlotte swallowed thickly at the pure malice emanating from the thing, tightening her grip on the railing of the elevator as they descended. Beside her, Eleven and Hopper joined hands. A second later, she felt Eleven's other hand nudge hers – and she took it, drawing comfort from the girl, as selfish as it was.

She thought of Dustin then – hoping and praying he was alright. He was smart, too smart for his own good, and she suspected that he may have had something to do with the lack of demodogs – as much

as she prayed he was still at the relative safety of the Byers' house. At least the Byers were whole again – as whole as they could be, after all the horror.

Unbidden, she thought of Steve. Maybe it was the feeling of impending doom, the increasing struggle to breathe the polluted air, the regret building in her – but she pictured him there. She'd apologize – if she lived through it. Hell – maybe she'd even tell him how she felt.

Because right then, in the red-lit hellish space – she knew that whatever she thought she felt about Steve Harrington, and his stupid hair and his stupid mom-voice, and stupid car – was not hate. And she realised that the only reason she was so cut up about his dismissal of her was because – *fuck* – because she really *fucking* liked him.

The realisation hit her with a jolt – just as Hopper stopped the elevator, physically and mentally shaking.

Slowly, Eleven let go of her hand – letting go of Hopper's hand too – as she stepped forwards. Hopper met her gaze, and Charlotte stepped closer to him instinctively, his hand coming up to brush back a strand of hair that was too short to go in her ponytail. "You're brave, kid." He said softly. His hand lingered on her cheek – looking at her with ill-disguised fondness, and she felt a surge of affection for the man who had protected them all. She could remember her father – the man he had been – but she couldn't picture him the way she pictured Hopper now. Not so vividly, not so tangible.

They turned back to face the Gate as Eleven raised her hand, and Charlotte could practically feel the surge of energy that built in the air around them. *Something* moved in the light behind the Gate, like a silhouette through gauze – and Charlotte flinched at the sheer size of it, the monstrosity of it.

At first, nothing seemed to be happening – but for a faint crackle of orange energy on the edges of the tear in the earth – Eleven's eyes shutting, as she took a deep breath. Then, her eyes flew open – and the orange flared, as her power slowly began to seal up the sides of the gash. Charlotte breathed a shaky sigh of relief – when she caught

on a skittering movement out of the corner of her eye.

She whirled, drawing Hopper's attention as she switched her torch beam on into the darkness. She squinted, unable to make anything out – when a snarl and a crash on top of the elevator made her scream, recoiling away from the demodog's head that suddenly appeared, snapping at her. Hopper's gun going off made her duck down, and she watched as it fell – the next attack surprising her again, but this time – her gun was in her hands, and she shot at the thing that jumped at Hopper, making it fall back as it swiped at him with wicked claws.

They only had time to share a nod – before Hopper turned his powerful torch onto the walls, and they made out the climbing forms of a horde of the creatures. Charlotte reached for her discarded shot gun, and pumped it, sliding a shot into place with a definitive clicking sound. As Hopper fired upon the creatures on the walls, Charlotte kept her gun at the ready, and sure enough – as Hopper's rifle ran out of ammunition, one of the monsters took a leap at them.

She fired – adrenaline keeping her hands steady – and the thing exploded with the force of it.

There was no time to feel the glow of satisfaction, because the next one was already upon them, Hopper armed with his other shotgun – and she fired again, and again, and again. Behind them she could feel a heat rising, a build-up of energy making the hair on the back of her neck stand up, and a creaking, roaring sound. She didn't dare to look, didn't dare to take her eyes off the creatures – one mistake, one lull in their shots, and they would be on them faster than they could blink.

She was sweating now, a cold sweat, making her hands slip on her gun. And then Eleven was screaming – and she couldn't help it, she turned in fear, in fascination – eyes widening at the sight of the girl raising into the air, a shield forming before her as the Mind Flayer's darkness attempted to break through. She looked as if she was glowing – power exploding from her, forcing the darkness back.

Charlotte's gun slipped from her sweaty, loose grip.

And that was all it took.

As the tendril of power receded, further and further, the Gate sealing shut – Charlotte felt the familiar, white hot tearing pain explode down her shoulder and back. She didn't have time to react, didn't have time to scream – because the Gate crashed shut, and the thing that had clawed her had already released her, and was falling. She was falling.

Hopper slid beneath Eleven's body as she collapsed, catching the frail looking girl and cradling her to him.

Charlotte collapsed to her knees beside them, bowing her head, and trying to focus on anything but the pain running through her, and the blood and sweat soaking her skin. They were crying, Eleven clutching at Hopper – Hopper saying something she couldn't understand. Slowly, Charlotte reached out, and hit the reverse button on the elevator, and with another heart-stopping jolt, the elevator began to rise towards the surface world.

Dimly, she felt someone take her hand.

Charlotte turned her face into the cool air, closing her eyes briefly, and soaking in the freedom of fresh air – out of the gloom of the place. For a moment, the world slowed down to the faint beat of her heart, and the rustling of a slow breeze in the trees.

“-Hospital, okay? Henderson? *Charlotte?*”

Hopper's frantic voice brought her back to her senses. She blinked dazedly at the man, who she belatedly realised was holding her upright – his hands on her shoulders the only thing keeping her from collapsing face first into the cement. She struggled to regain her stance, and smiled weakly at him.

“Sorry.” She said faintly. “I'm alright.”

“Sorry? *Alright?*” Hopper made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a groan, “Kid, you’re bleeding all over the place, *for the second time*, might I add.”

Charlotte, absurdly, felt a bubble of laughter leave her – turning her face to the sky as she laughed, semi-hysterically. “*I know*. I should really stop getting cut up by evil monsters from alternate dimensions.” She tried to force the smile from her face at Hopper’s unamused look. Eleven was watching her warily from beside Hopper, leaning on his truck for support. The girl looked dead on her feet.

“Henderson, let’s get you to a hospital – okay?”

Charlotte meant to nod – but the rumble of a fast approaching vehicle made them all tense and turn, the motion pulling at her wounds, and causing another surge of blood to trickle down her back. Eleven made to push herself upright, but swayed dangerously, and leant back against the truck – looking woozy. Hopper backed her up, half-pushing her so that she thudded back beside Eleven – and pulled out her hand gun from her holster, the only one with bullets left.

The blue Camaro that pulled to a stop in front of them was dangerously familiar – and Charlotte’s head swam. *What the hell was Billy doing here?*

Then the driver’s door opened, and Max stumbled out – the back doors opening, and Mike, Dustin and Lucas spilling out. Hopper let out a soft exclamation; “what the *fu-*” before the kids were upon them, Mike’s arms closing around Eleven as she sagged weakly towards him. They were all filthy, Mike with a faint scratch on his cheek. She had no doubt then, that it *had* been them that had distracted the demodogs.

Charlotte barely had a second to process before Dustin flew into her, winding her slightly with the force of his assault, and his cap going flying. He was sobbing, his words coming out garbled and unintelligible. Charlotte ignored the encroaching fuzzy darkness at the edges of her vision, and the pain in her shoulder – and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his curly hair, and breathing him in. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m okay, see? I promised you – I promised you...” she mumbled to him, squeezing him as tight as she

could.

“Whoa – Harrington, you don’t look so good – why don’t you sit down, buddy...”

Her head snapped up at Hopper’s worried voice. Her blurry vision focussed on the wobbling form of Steve Harrington – Lucas and Hopper tucked under his arms for support. Her eyes widened slightly at the sight of him, face bloody and broken almost beyond recognition.

She moved unsteadily towards him – noticing instantly, the second his eyes found hers. With a grunt, he pushed off Hopper and Lucas, ignoring their sudden protests.

Her heart was pounding out of her chest.

Every feeling, every thought, everything that she had realised came crashing back all at once – and she found herself lost for words at the sight of him.

They stumbled at the same time – Steve tripping over something, Charlotte’s legs buckling under her as her blood loss began to rob her of feeling. They fell into each other, with a force that left her breathless – both of them bringing up their arms to catch the other, entangled as they came slowly to their knees. Steve’s eyes were unfocused, glassy, blood coming from a wound on the side of his head. Their foreheads came together, too weak to hold their heads straight.

“You – you protected them. You protected him.” Charlotte said – not even questioning. He nodded anyway, and opened his mouth to speak – probably to drop another stupid line, and she found she couldn’t bear the way her heart thudded at the thought of hearing his familiar voice – so without thinking, she leant forwards and closed the gap between them – and pressed her lips to his.

It was raw – and wet with blood, and tears she couldn’t help but let fall. But it was crackling and burning with something that she felt warm her body to her toes, and when his hand came up to weakly curl into her hair, smearing dirt on her cheek and neck on the way –

she let him pull her closer.

She could hear sirens in the distance, could feel the first dim rays of the sun starting to warm the top of her head. All she could feel was Steve, until her senses began to fail her, and she pulled back, resting her forehead to his as they both panted, her vision fading as she slumped into him, his own weight starting to sway to the side.

The world went dark around them, fingers still weakly interlocked as they were lifted into the ambulance.

11. Snowball Effect

Summary for the Chapter:

We have wrapped up another season! Wow! Now it's just a waiting game for season 3! I'm so glad there have been fans of Charlie's story and I'm so happy you seem to love her as much as I do!

I'm thinking of writing a series of one-shots and missing scenes from the seasons, and/or memories - so if anyone has any requests for anything they'd like to see - and not just about Charlie - let me know!

They were discharged around the same time – but they both had to wait together for Hopper and Joyce to come sign them out.

Steve's parents were still in Tuscany, like they always were this time of year – and news of Steve's injuries had reached them, but they hadn't deemed it a matter important enough to return home, despite the fact that it had been touch and go for a while. An untreated concussion was no joke – and there had been talk of a possible haemorrhage. Steve had been running on a toxic mixture of fear, adrenaline and determination since the kids had bundled him into the car. Paired with his broken rib – no one had been quite sure how he had managed to make it so far.

As for Charlotte – her own injuries had been relatively easy to fix. She'd had emergency sutures put in, due to the fact that her wounds gave no sign of stopping bleeding. There must have been some sort of blood thinner coating the creature's claws – but of course the doctors couldn't have known that. Then they'd set her up with an IV and began another blood transfusion. Her mother hadn't even called – and though it was probably for the best, Charlotte couldn't help but feel deeper pangs of pain every time she got a visitor and it wasn't her.

In the week they'd been kept at the hospital – it felt like they were in a suspended state of being. Time didn't seem accurate in the cool, white walled hospital room – not when the frantic activity outside in

the town seemed to be moving at a million miles an hour. They'd been put in separate hospital rooms – and for that, Charlotte was thankful.

She didn't know what to say to him.

She'd exposed a frighteningly vulnerable part of herself that night, and she didn't even know if he felt the same. He had been addled with head trauma and an adrenaline rush – and the last things they had said to each other were hateful and hurtful.

Call her a coward – but she didn't dare to face the aching uncertainty of her new realized feelings. Everything felt wrong – even sitting together in the waiting room was awkward and uncomfortable, both of them avoiding each other's eyes. Steve still looked awful, but at least the blood on his face was gone, and the swelling of his nose and eyes had gone down slightly.

“Hey, you two.”

Joyce's soft voice made them both turn to the front desk, where Joyce and Hopper were standing – Joyce smiling widely, and Hopper with something like warmth in his eyes.

“Hello, Mrs. Byers,”

“Hey, Joyce-”

They had begun speaking at the same time. With an awkward look at him, Charlotte sat back slightly. “Thank you for doing this.” Steve continued uncertainly.

Joyce pushed Hopper towards the desk, and hurried over to them. “Of course, honey – it's nothing. It's the least I can do – it's a wonder your mother-”

“Joyce.” Hopper cut in sternly, and Joyce cut herself off, smiling tersely, as she reached out to brush Steve's fringe back. Without his usual styling, it fell messily over his forehead. Charlotte watched with faint amusement at the startled wonder in Steve's eyes as Joyce cradled his face and looked him over with motherly concern. *She knew that feeling.* That wonderful strangeness of being treated so

gently by a mother.

Greedily, she fell into Joyce's embrace, and reveled in her gentle cooing, as Hopper helped Steve up, and slung a friendly arm around him. "Are you in much pain, baby?" Joyce asked worriedly, as Charlotte winced as she stood up.

Charlotte shot her a smile. "Not much. I'm on some pretty strong pain-killers, so I'll be fine."

Hopper grunted, and tousled her hair as she passed him. "No driving for either of you until you're off them." Steve sighed heavily, but nodded under Hopper's heavy gaze. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Also, Harrington, Joyce and I were thinking it might be a good idea for you to stay with one of us, until your parents get back."

Steve blinked in surprise. "What?"

Joyce smiled at him, "Until your concussion clears up, at least. I don't know if I feel comfortable with you being alone with a head injury."

"Oh." Steve looked floored, and then looked to Charlotte. Charlotte shrugged, and opened the back door, and slid in, shutting it firmly behind her. Hopper shot her a strange look through the window, but as Steve began to say something – turned away.

She couldn't hear what they were saying in the car – but from the shy smile on Steve's face and Hopper's hand clapping him on the shoulder again, she could guess what he had agreed to. A small part of her was briefly jealous. It would be nice to be looked after just for a little while – but she had left Dustin and her mother alone for long enough. Her brow creased with the thought, and she felt the familiar building stress creeping up on her as the others got in the car. Joyce turned to look at her. "Charlie, the invitation is open to you as well. I'm sure Will would love having Dustin at home, and I know Jonathan is keen to see you."

Charlotte – for a small, selfish second – actually contemplated it.

But then she shook her head, forcing a smile onto her lips. "It's alright, thank you."

"You sure, kid?" Hopper squinted at her through the rear-view mirror.

She nodded resolutely. "Sure. I got stuff to do at home."

She could feel Steve's eyes boring into the side of her head, and turned away from him, staring out at the passing scenery instead.

They dropped off Steve and Hopper at Steve's house, letting Steve pack his things before Hopper drove them in Steve's car to his cabin. Charlotte didn't say goodbye to him as he got out of the car, despite his small wave.

Joyce was watching her through the mirror as she drove and it was silent for a while. Then she cleared her throat, and a small, almost impish smile worked its way onto her face. "So. What's the story with Steve?"

Charlotte tensed. "There's no story." She grumbled.

Joyce tilted her head in curiosity, eyes on the road but smile wide. "Hmmm... that's not what I heard." Charlotte said nothing, and Joyce continued anyway. "I hear from many witnesses that there was an *encounter* at the lab."

Charlotte clenched her fist around the handle of her overnight bag, and took a steadying breath. "It was a mistake. It shouldn't have happened."

Joyce looked taken aback. "But-"

"He's still in love with Nancy, and I wasn't thinking straight. He's made it very clear how he feels about me." Charlotte cut her off sharply. At Joyce's soft, thoughtful hum, she felt guilt roil in her stomach. "Sorry. I just... don't want to talk about it."

"That's alright, baby. We don't have to." Joyce said gently, and

looked away from the road for a second, to shoot Charlotte a comforting smile. “Now, I’ve done some grocery shopping for you guys, so your fridge should be stocked...”

Charlotte let Joyce’s words wash over her, and soothe the residual burn of the thought of him, intense gratefulness for the kind woman driving away anything she didn’t want to think about.

She was going home.

“Charlotte? Is that you?”

The second the door closed behind her, Charlotte heard her mother’s voice – coming predictably – from the living room. She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the pseudo weight of everything settle back on her shoulders – wound actually aching in protest. “Yeah, mom. It’s me.”

“Would you come in here? There’s some laundry to be folded – and I still haven’t had breakfast-”

The back door opened with a slam. Seconds later, Dustin appeared in the doorway, looking horrified. “You weren’t supposed to be home yet!” he gasped.

Charlotte frowned. “I can go...” she said, and turned towards the door.

“NO!” Dustin grabbed her arm. “It’s okay! Just... go unpack and have a shower or something – you smell like a hospital, no offence-” He had begun to push her in the direction of the hallway, and she grabbed on to the door frame, and shot him a suspicious look.

“I have to cook breakfast, and there’s laundry to do-”

Dustin put his hands on his hips – and shot her a perfectly tailored unimpressed look. “Charlotte Henderson – you go have a shower, or

so help me, I will dye your hair neon green in your sleep.”

Charlotte gaped at him. “Jesus! Fine – what is with you? I thought you’d be happy to see me!” He just stared at her meanly – eyes narrowed. Charlotte sighed, and threw up her hands, stomping down the hallway towards the bathroom.

She wouldn’t admit it to him – but a shower under water with actual heat and pressure was *heaven* after the lukewarm piss-trickle of the hospital shower. She didn’t even notice the sting of her cuts – as she stood beneath the steaming spray and just absorbed the normality of everything.

A creak from beyond the shower curtain made her tense, eyes flying open and hands searching instantly for a weapon – heart thundering in her chest. Slowly, she pushed open the shower curtain, and peered out – only to see the shutter of the bathroom window swing and creak again in the breeze from outside. Charlotte swallowed thickly, breathing a shaky breath as she closed the curtain.

Maybe not normality.

She didn’t think things would ever be the same. Not after... *everything.*

Charlotte pressed her forehead into the cool tile of the shower wall, and willed her breath to slow – trying to bring on the calm of before. *Normality.* A small bitter chuckle forced its way out of her mouth, lips curling up at nothing.

She did feel more like herself after the shower, hair dampening the collar of her shirt. She brushed through her hair mechanically – staring at the visible roots of her own natural chestnut brown hair, growing out with a vengeance. Maybe she should dye it back to how it usually was.

Maybe she should stop damaging her hair to cope with emotional turmoil.

With a grimace, she set down the brush and finished getting dressed – already making a mental note of the things that needed doing. She'd taken too long dawdling in the shower and in her room already. Miraculously, Dustin hadn't managed to burn the house down whilst she was away – but she suspected that he may have stayed with Joyce, or at least someone had come to check on him, because there was no way that he had gotten this far without help. Not that he wasn't capable – but he was... easily distracted from menial tasks.

With a faint smile on her face – she left her bedroom – only to be assaulted with the scent of... eggs? Bacon? *Toast*?

Charlotte hurried into the kitchen, sliding to a halt in her socked feet. Dustin stood at the sink – scrubbing a fry pan, whilst two plates of food sat steaming on the neatly set kitchen table. Charlotte blinked rapidly – maybe it was a mirage? There was even a pitcher of orange juice, and a single sunflower in a tall thin vase. From the living room, she could hear the sounds of the TV – and cutlery clinking.

“Dustin...” she breathed appreciatively, and he turned and grinned, wearing the bright yellow gloves that Charlotte had once worn the scrub cat blood from their carpet. The whole scene was just so bizarre.

“Breakfast is served, madam...” He said, in a horrible British accent – taking a low bow. Stunned, Charlotte took a seat, as he pulled off the gloves and scrambled up to sit opposite her. She watched with a bemused smile as he poured the orange juice into two mismatched wine glasses he'd found god-knew-where. “Cheers!” he said, cheerfully – and Charlotte clinked her glass with his accordingly.

“You did all this?” she asked, scooping up some of the scrambled eggs on her plate, and putting it on her toast. Dustin nodded, almost bashfully. “For me?” she asked, touched.

“Yeah. I don't know... I just thought you should have some help around here more – so I practiced making some food. I made a list of things I can do,” Dustin said earnestly, pulling out a literal list on crumpled lined paper, “and I got Joyce to teach me how to use the laundry machine properly now, so- wait, why are you crying?”

Charlotte sniffled, smiling wetly at him. She didn't even know why in truth, just that she loved her brother so much, and it was one of the first times someone had offered to help. "You just make me happy, Dusty." She said, running a hand under her eyes.

Dustin shifted, smiling slightly. "I missed you while you were in hospital. I was worried..." he ducked his head. "I thought you and Steve were dead. You were so bloody and he got hit *really* hard, Lottie. I don't even know how he was able to stand."

"Hey," Charlotte patted his hand where it lay dormant on his fork. "We're both okay. We're tougher than we look."

Dustin nodded slightly, but resumed eating his breakfast and after a moment, Charlotte did too. They fell into a comfortable silence, the only sound the faint warbling from birds outside, and the noise from the television. Then Dustin dropped his fork with a clatter – and pointed at her. "I almost forgot! You need to be free all day, the day after tomorrow."

"Why?" Charlotte frowned at him.

Dustin mimed sealing his lips. "I am bound by secrecy, dear sister." He said dramatically.

Charlotte shook her head, laughing. "Fine. Keep your secrets then. See if I care."

She should have suspected something when Jonathan turned up out of the blue the morning she had been instructed to keep free, to take her to a movie – and then to the diner, and then to the record store, leaving her alone for only a moment when he went to make a call.

She should have known when Dustin left early in the morning with no explanation, should have known when Jonathan pulled up at his own house, which had all of its lights off – and when he insisted on going inside first.

But she was still surprised, when – upon entering the dark house – all the lights suddenly came on, and a loud chorus of; “*SURPRISE!*” greeted her, along with a large, hand-drawn sign hanging above the kitchen, spelling out HAPPY BIRTHDAY.

Her birthday – only a month before Christmas – was usually glossed over. She had never had any interest in celebrating the day, and besides, the months before Christmas were when she saved up the most, so frivolous spending was strictly forbidden. At most, she and Dustin would bake a cake together, with her doing most of the baking, and him doing most of what he *claimed* was decorating. They’d do it the night before, and stay up until midnight, and he would sing her happy birthday as the clock ticked over to 12 am, and they’d eat cake in the middle of the night. Tomorrow would be her birthday.

To say she was overwhelmed was an understatement. She blinked at them all – Hopper with one hand on Joyce’s shoulder, Max and Lucas holding hands – Mike, Will and Eleven clustered together beside them, Nancy and Jonathan standing side-by-side, Dustin grinning at her from beside his friends – and... Steve, looking at her softly from next to Joyce. His face was healing quickly, she instantly noticed the difference from when they had parted at the hospital. She had to look away.

“Are you surprised?” Dustin piped up, and she swallowed – taking in his hopeful eyes.

She took a deep breath, feeling a sudden overwhelming warmth fill her, for the mismatched family in front of her. “Yeah. Yeah I’m surprised.” She said finally, looking up and grinning wide and honestly at them.

Joyce made a happy sound, and clapped her hands together, “Come on everybody! Dinner’s ready – Charlie, it’s all your favourites. Someone escort the birthday girl to the table!” Charlotte only had a second to be surprised again before she was being pulled in two different directions. Max and Dustin each had a grip on her hands, and were glaring at each other fiercely.

“What are you doing?” Dustin asked snappily.

“What does it look like?” Max retorted, and Charlotte could practically see them both gearing up for a fight, and looked around hopelessly. Everyone seemed busy, either helping in the kitchen or setting the tables that had been pushed together to make one huge table in the kitchen.

“-my sister!”

“Exactly, so you get to see her all the time! HEY-!”

With a faint pressure, some unseen force ripped Max and Dustin’s hands off her, and she found herself propelled forwards a few quick feet – and face to face with Eleven. Charlotte found herself smiling at the barely disguised satisfied smirk on the younger girl’s face. “You’re my hero, El.” She said gratefully – ignoring the indignant cries from the other two behind her, as Eleven linked her fingers with hers and walked her over to the table – chair telekinetically seating her. Charlotte couldn’t help but feel a spike of worry as the girl dabbed delicately at the trickle of blood that came from her nose – despite Eleven’s smile.

Soon they were all seated, around steaming plates and bowls. It was an odd mix of foods – true to Joyce’s claim – handmade pizza, and nachos, and salads – enough to feed a small army. Charlotte ignored the niggling worry about the cost of it all, and turned to Joyce. “Thank you... I don’t know what to say...”

“Don’t say anything.” Mike piped up, staring hard at the nachos in front of him, “Just eat!”

Charlotte laughed at Nancy’s scowl at her brother, and waved her hands. “Mike’s right – please!”

With gusto, the kids dug in, Hopper following suit with barely restrained patience. Joyce held her gaze for a moment through the din. “*Is it all okay?*” she mouthed.

Charlotte nodded, smiling widely at the woman. “*I love it.*” She mouthed back, watching the way Joyce beamed to herself.

She was shooed out of the kitchen afterwards, and told to sit on the couch, where Will, Mike and Eleven joined her a few moments later to keep her company. It was interesting to watch their dynamic – the way Eleven mellowed out Mike, yet energized Will, the way Will intrigued Eleven and comforted Mike. There was a lot of communication through looks, especially between Mike and Eleven. It was all very sweet – and a mark of a positive thing to come out of all of their ordeals.

The calm only lasted until Steve appeared in the doorway. He hadn't said a word to her all night – but now, there was something like resolution in his eyes as he approached her where she sat on the couch – and she felt herself panic spectacularly. She practically flung herself from the couch – startling Will and Eleven – and, avoiding Steve's eyes, ducked around him, "I'm just going to the bathroom!" she called out, voice strangled. She slammed the bathroom door shut behind her, and leant against it – cursing in a low whisper as she got her thundering heart under control, cheeks burning hot. "What the fuck is *wrong* with you?" she muttered, crossing to the sink and staring at herself in the mirror. "Get it under control." She pointed sternly at herself.

"CHARLIE! HURRY UP!"

Dustin's yell from the other room made her jump – and hurry to flush the toilet and run the sink as if she had been doing normal human things – rather than talking to herself in the mirror.

They were all in the living room when she came out, and she realized with a jolt – that there was a long, suspiciously shaped object resting across Jonathan and Joyce's laps. The wrapping paper was a deep blue – and the ribbon tied in a neat bow was gold. It looked like the prettiest thing she'd seen.

"Oh." She said succinctly. "You guys did *not* need to get me anything. Tonight has been... a dream."

Jonathan grinned at her. "Don't be silly, Charlie. Come open your present." Dustin was oddly still and silent – usually he was a huge fan

of unwrapping presents, even if they weren't his. Charlotte crossed the room slowly, aware of all of their excited and eager faces.

Slowly, with faintly trembling hands, she carefully eased the sticky-tape away from the paper, methodically taking off the wrapping. When she caught the first glimpse of the smooth powder blue varnish, she knew what it was. The brand new Schafer Stratocaster Fiesta was a guitar she'd lusted over before she had gotten her Yamaha – and now... here it was, sitting across her lap.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

On one hand, it was a little piece of a dream – but a dream that had been shattered by the Upside Down, the scars on her body and the abandonment from her band members. She used to be so sure of her future – get into college with a music scholarship, move out of Hawkins and take her brother with her, and make a life for themselves, make a future doing what she loved.

But now – nothing seemed real. Nothing seemed stable.

“Do- do you like it?” Dustin asked hesitantly.

Charlotte looked up at them all, unable to help the tears filling her eyes – overwhelmed with a coalescing mess of emotion that spilled over. “Yeah.” She said breathlessly – not sure if she meant it or not.

But they all seemed happy about it, so she couldn't bring herself to splinter the illusion.

The cake was an incredible layered thing, and she hadn't needed the kids to tell her that they had decorated it – the mess of chocolates and candy and multicolored icing was evidence enough. They sung a raucous happy birthday – complete with unnecessary adlibs from Lucas and Dustin, and then she blew out the candles. It was sweet and perfect, and everything she'd ever thought a birthday should be.

Hopper dropped them back home – and Charlotte was grateful for his less smothering nature. He didn't linger, just waved them goodbye from the truck, and pulled away.

It was late – but Charlotte took her time getting ready for bed. Her birthday fell on a Monday, and because she was still under medical advisement to stay home – she would be alone. She wanted to stay in this little bubble of warmth a little longer.

She hovered in the kitchen, illuminated by the glowing numbers on their oven, and the light from the street outside. It was peaceful.

“Lottie?”

Dustin's voice from the doorway caught her attention. He was holding a cupcake, with a lit candle, and a small red box. “I know we already had cake, but...” he glanced at the time, and Charlotte realized with a start that it was midnight. “Happy birthday.”

“You're sweet, Dusty.” Charlotte said softly, and took a seat at the table as he hurried to set the cupcake in front of her.

“Make a wish!” he trilled, gesturing towards the candle.

“Already came true.” She winked at him, and blew out the candle.

Dustin tilted his head. “What was it?”

Charlotte shrugged. “That we're alive and happy.” She took a swipe of the icing off with her finger and licked it off. “That's all I want.”

Dustin shoved the red box at her. “I hope you like this then.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes at him. “I'll like anything you get me – but you didn't have to-” she felt her stomach drop as she opened the box fully. “Dustin!” nestled on a plush velvet cushion, was a pair of tiny gold stud earrings, inlaid with what looked to be rubies – and a matching pendant necklace. “What- how did you- did you steal this?” she demanded, putting the box down as if it were a bomb.

Dustin looked affronted. “No!” he replied indignantly. “But...” now he looked sheepish, “I did have some help.”

“Who?” Charlotte demanded. *Who the hell had that kind of money?*

Dustin shook his head solemnly. “I can’t say.”

Charlotte narrowed her eyes. “And you’re positive that they weren’t the result of any *illicit* behavior...”

“Yes, oh my god!” Dustin said exasperatedly. “now, do you like them?”

Charlotte picked up the box again, hesitantly. They *were* beautiful – nicer than anything else she owned. The rubies were almost the same red as her old Yamaha, and for a second she felt a pang of longing, and then a pang of something else. *Red like blood, red like love.* “They’re... gorgeous, Dustin – they’re too much, really.”

Dustin looked appeased. “Nonsense.” Then he yawned.

Charlotte gave him a look. “Time for bed. You have school tomorrow.” She grimaced, “Well... today.”

Dustin stifled another yawn. “So do you!” he pouted, even as he stood up.

“Nope!” Charlotte said cheerily, “Doctor’s orders.”

“So unfair.” Dustin grumbled, and sullenly stomped off to his room, leaving Charlotte with the cupcake and the jewelry.

Who the fuck helped buy these?

Charlotte scowled to herself.

Another mystery – for another day.

For now, she had other things to work out. She had to make a budget plan – Dustin’s Snow Ball was coming up soon, and he needed a new suit.

She grinned to herself at the thought of him in a suit – sobering when she remembered that she had made a promise to perform. To save the school money, and all that bullshit.

Already, she felt a headache growing at the thought of having to talk to Edward and Richard about it.

Another problem – for another day.

Steve walked in, immediately feeling out of place. Eyes of the middle-schoolers fell upon him, as well as two other familiar faces. The gym's transformation did shock him a little bit. He couldn't even remember his middle school dances – so to see it so... *glittery* was strange.

Jonathan smiled awkwardly at him, nodding once before turning back to the kids he was photographing. Nancy waved at him, a little bashfully, and he had an odd pang of déjà vu, as she smiled that shy smile he used to see all the time. "Steve, hey! I didn't realise you volunteered to chaperone."

Steve laughed slightly, both at the absurdity of him signing up to chaperone a *middle school dance*, and the fact that he was even here. "No... I, uh, I just needed to see Charlotte."

Nancy's smile stiffened slightly, but returned in full-force quickly. "I never would have thought... you and her..." Steve couldn't help the slight defensiveness he felt, and it must have shown somehow, because Nancy hurried to amend her statement. "It's just unexpected – that's all."

Steve shrugged. "We've all done the unexpected recently." The sound of a microphone squeaking slightly caught his attention, and he turned in place.

He felt his heart skip a beat.

She was there, on the tiny stage they must have erected just for tonight – with Edward and Richard. They were putting on a show of being friends, Charlotte's head thrown back as she laughed, the microphone just picking up the sound – but Steve could tell it was

fake. She had her new guitar slung over her shoulder, and she had dyed her hair – a deep chestnut brown that made her eyes shine even brighter green – he realised with a shock, that it was her natural hair colour, something he hadn't seen since their middle school days. She was wearing red, a dark red that matched her lipstick – and the glittering earrings, and pendant around her neck.

Before he could make a move forward, to try and talk to her – the kids started filing onto the dancefloor at some hidden signal from the teachers – the amps switched on with a low hum.

“Hey everybody! Let's get this dance started!” her voice filled the space, and some kids even cheered. Dustin included.

Almost immediately, they kicked off into a poppy, feel good tune he'd never heard before – but the chorus was catchy enough that he felt like he could probably sing along if he heard it again. She was energetic, bouncing around the stage as she sang. *She was meant to do this.*

She was so alive, beautiful in a different way that was unexplainable. Steve couldn't take his eyes off of her as she performed song after song – never seeming to tire. He only realised she had started speaking normally again when she put down her guitar.

“-This next one is a slow one. I wrote it for someone very special.”

She closed her eyes as she began singing. The only backing was the thuds and clicks of Richard's drum machine, and the piano from Edward. It was beautiful.

“...Well nothing's gonna hurt me with my eyes shut, I can see through them, I can see through them, I am drawing pictures, I'm evading, I will not use them, I will not use them... Again...”

Steve couldn't pinpoint who the song was about – he was guessing it was about someone he knew, just not who. Then his eyes fell upon the boys, and he noticed Will's shining eyes.

“Cause I wanna be bigger than life, hurt you, hurt you-”

Oh.

“No, nothing’s gonna hurt me with my eyes shut, I can see through them, I can see through them...”

His suspicions were confirmed when she smiled directly at the young boy, winking quickly before her gaze roamed the crowd again. They played another ballad, but a cover of The Police this time, and he felt his heart warm disgustingly as he watched all of his boys dance.

“I feel so cold and I long for your embrace, I keep crying baby, baby please...”

Ouch.

Charlie just resisted the urge to wince at the lyrics she was singing – instead focusing her eyes on her brother and his friends. Eleven and Max looked so beautiful, and she made a note to thank Nancy for dancing with Dustin. She found Will easily in the crowd, and though the song she had written for him, for *them*, hadn’t made it onto the set list approved by the principal – she had wanted to perform it live for him. Just once.

However, this was their last song for the night – and then she could go and...

Well she didn’t know what she was going to do. Wander around sleeplessly again. But it was cold now, and she hadn’t brought a jacket.

As she strummed out the final chords of the song, played the final notes – she felt nostalgia drift over her as she watched the kids swaying in front of her.

Innocence.

She had been them once. Once upon a time, she had danced to a mediocre cover band, her hair done up and in a pretty dress – and she had gone home, and told Dustin about her shimmering dream of

a night.

Now...

Fucking Christ.

Now she had a gun in her guitar case, a bad craving for a cigarette, too many memories and regrets to count, and tears building in her eyes.

But at least they were finished the song.

The hall was deafening with cheers. And it was a mark of how much she had changed that her body didn't thrum with the feeling of applause, that she didn't call for an encore, that she didn't even bother to smile.

Instead, she slipped offstage – some jittery feeling making her hands shake and tears finally spill from her eyes. She headed straight for the room they had left their things in – feeling a twinge of guilt for not staying say goodbye to her brother, but she needed air. She stopped briefly to snag her lighter and cigarettes from her purse, before continuing her rush out to the back.

She huffed out a shaky breath as the frigid air hit her, making her fumble her lighter and drop it into the snow at her feet. Cursing herself for wearing a dress, she lit up, and tried to relax against the cold brick of the wall behind her. She lasted for as long as it took her heart to stop pounding and she couldn't even finish her second cigarette before she started shivering so badly she knew she had return inside.

She thought the hall was empty when she re-emerged, still shaking slightly. As expected, they had packed up only their things – leaving her to do her own stuff there, clearly serious about this being their last gig together. She stood still, eyes fixed upon the sparkles on the snowflakes hanging from the ceiling, willing her body to warm up.

“Hey.”

She jumped, hands going to her waist – looking for a handgun that wasn't there. She span quickly, heart pounding again.

But it was only... Steve.

“Sorry!” he apologized, hands up defensively. He looked sheepish. “I forgot how jumpy you are.”

Charlotte swallowed, mind blank. She’d been religiously avoiding the very person standing in front of her. She spat out the first thing that came to mind. “Why are *you* here?”

“I came to talk to you.” He said frankly, still with that sheepish look on his face. She wanted to kiss- *NO* – slap it off him. “You’ve been avoiding me. Pretty well actually.”

She decided quickly that she had to turn on the asshole if she was going to get out of here any less emotionally compromised. She grunted. “If you knew I was avoiding you – why exactly did you think it would be a good idea to come?” she turned away from him, heading for the stage and her guitar and mic.

“Because I’m done pretending that there’s nothing between us.”

She fought the blush on her frozen cheeks, keeping her head down and face away from him. “There *isn’t* anything between us.” She said lowly, fiddling unnecessarily with the adjustment on the mic stand.

“Then why aren’t you looking at me?” His voice was close, taunting, irritating in the way only he was.

She sighed. “Because your face makes me angry.”

“So there *is* passion!” he said brightly, and she felt his hand on her elbow. *Too close*. “I’ll take what I can get, even if it’s just, like, pure rage.” he spun her with a movement that made her breath catch in her throat. Suddenly they were face to face. He was wearing red like her, but unlike her, he looked fifty shades of beautiful. Charlotte cursed the little romantic cupid that decided she would think things like that, and made her stomach flutter at the way his lips quirked – or the way his eyes looked a shade of gold in the lighting. “Hmm?” he hummed at her, smirking at the blush *she* could feel staining her cheeks.

“I hate your dumb face.” She whispered. “I hate your dumb lines, I

hate your big hair, I hate your car, I hate your mom voice, and I hate the way you look at me, and I *hate* the way it makes me feel.” Her voice rose as she spoke, making him recoil slightly.

Steve quirked a brow. “Wow.” Guilt and panic flooded her stomach as he stepped back, turning away from her. “You know, I never thought I’d say this, but your brother is right.”

“W-what?” she winced at the tremor in her voice, bringing her arms up around herself.

Steve was grinning now – full and unbelievably happy as he turned around to face her. “Do you know what he told me?” He didn’t wait for her response. “He told me that every time you’ll say ‘I hate,’ you really mean ‘I love.’”

Charlotte froze, caught under his gaze.

This isn’t happening.

He stepped towards her again, and lent down – pressing their foreheads together, and for a second she felt like she was standing outside Hawkins Lab again. They were both bleeding and exhausted and their hearts were pounding, but they were together, and she was so *fucking* relieved he was okay and so *fucking* grateful he had protected the kids, and she had just wanted him, just *once* to know that-

He kissed her, and the phantom memory-dream melted away at the feeling of his lips on hers.

And because she was the pathetic, hopeless bitch she was – she brought her hands up to tangle in his stupid, *perfect* hair and pulled him closer. She let him tilt her back, let him kiss her deeply, let him in.

She pulled away from him, needing to catch her breath. He was panting, and his lips were darkened by her lipstick and the force of their connection. She felt tears in her eyes again, and swallowed thickly. “*I hate you.*” She said softly.

“I love you too.”

She let out a sound halfway between a sob and groan, and reached for him again – kissing him like she was dying again. And he met her halfway.